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THE MAKER OF SECRETS

BY

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THE MAKER OF SECRETS.

CHAPTER I.

CONCERNS A GOLD-FISH.

"You think it strange that I should make a pet of such a creature—eh?"

"Well, I do."

"I don't see why. Haven't you any animal you are fond of—a dog, cat, or perhaps a horse?"

"Of course there are people who make pets of less common creatures. Bruce had a pet spider, if tradition is to be trusted," I replied.

My friend laughed—a queer, uncanny laugh.

"I know a woman who keeps a pet mongoose," he said. "A man who lives up in Hampstead and whom I often visit keeps, in what I would call 'domesticity,' pythons, cobras, and other reptiles. Again, there's a rich man in Monmouthshire in whose park are macaws, which fly to him when he whistles for them, and who has, in addition, a pet bear, a pet jaguar, and a pair of zebras. Why strange that I should be partial to my gold-fish? This little fellow, now—this little fellow——"

And the queer man in the opposite corner of the

railway carriage paused to gaze down with a most abnormal—there is no other word adequately to describe it—expression in his eyes at the tiny ornamental fish which swam slowly round and round the little crystal bowl suspended from his finger by a red silken cord.

At one instant the water, magnifying it, caused it to swell and lengthen, its eyes to dilate oddly, its filmy fins to gleam with iridescence. At the next it shrank quickly, its eyes contracting into little dots the size of pins' heads. There certainly was something very graceful about this tiny fish that had never previously struck me when I had chanced to observe gold and silver fish in their tanks, or in ornamental water.

It was an evening early in May, a bright, beautiful evening. I recollect how, for ten minutes or more, I had sat back in a corner of the railway compartment, my evening newspaper lying unopened beside me upon the seat, gazing out upon a spectacle I never tire of watching, the sight of the sun slowly sinking in its glory of crimson and gold. At last, when the gold had mellowed into the fiery afterglow, leaving the sky above it a pale green, I had absent-mindedly turned my head. At once my gaze had rested on the only other occupant of my compartment, seated in the corner farthest from me.

He was a very remarkable-looking man, and my attention became centred upon him—very tall, very dark, very slim, and exquisitely groomed. His hair was parted in the middle with almost mathematical precision. His complexion was pale olive, and rather sallow. His clean-shaven lips were thin, sensitive, mobile—with the upper lip rather short. I noticed his eyebrows—black, well-marked, arched and nearly meeting. His eyelashes, I saw, as he kept his gaze depressed, were extraordinarily long. His hands, well-shaped, with tapering fingers, were singularly white, the hands, I should have said, of an artist of some kind. I wondered what his eyes were like, as minute after minute

I waited, expecting him to look up. But he did not look up. His whole attention seemed riveted upon the tiny fish swimming slowly, aimlessly, monotonously round and round the crystal bowl which depended from his finger by the red cord.

I do not think I have ever seen anyone so completely engrossed as my solitary fellow-passenger from Brighton in the contemplation of that gold-fish in its bowl. Now, raising his head, he held the bowl upon a level with his eyes and scrutinised it closely. Now he held it a little way above him, and watched it from a different angle. Now he lowered it again, and once more gazed down at it. Several times his movements recalled to my mind the antics of a crystal-gazer I was, some years ago, induced by a friend to visit. Could it, I wondered, be the crystal bowl he scrutinised so closely, so persistently, and not the fish that happened to be in it?

Five minutes must have passed before he paused in his contemplation. Looking up suddenly he glanced quickly across at me, and our eyes met.

Never before certainly had I beheld eyes so expressive, so penetrating, so dark, as the eyes that now gazed steadily into mine from the opposite corner of that ~~railway~~ compartment. They were eyes of jet, most wonderfully intelligent; eyes charged with intellect, if I may so express it; eyes that in a woman would be described as "luminous." For some moments we sat looking at each other. Then, all at once, the stranger smiled. It was a singularly captivating smile. It lit up the dark, handsome face in a manner most remarkable. I remember thinking at that moment that this tall, well-dressed man, with the appearance of a foreigner, was by far the most attractive personality I had ever met in my life.

And then he spoke.

"Isn't it adorable—perfectly adorable?" he exclaimed in a tone of deep emotion, obviously referring to his fish in the crystal globe. "And to think I should at last—at last, after all these months of search and of

anxiety—have succeeded in discovering this unique treasure. Oh, it is splendid! Oh, the happiness it gives me!

His dark eyes were aflame with an odd light, the light which betrays the enthusiast, the fanatic, or the genius.

For some minutes the impression his words and manner had made upon me remained, the impression that my fellow-passenger could not be quite normal. I decided to humour him.

"It is a fine specimen," I answered, staring hard at the fish from my corner of the compartment, and adopting a tone that would have done credit to the greatest living authority upon gold-fish, their habits and their haunts. "From what you say, you have not, I take it, had it long."

Again he fixed his piercing gaze upon me.

"I have not the pleasure of knowing who you are, sir," he answered slowly—his voice, I now noticed, had a most pleasant timbre—"but this I must tell you, you are talking at random and upon a subject of which you evidently know nothing. You wish me to think you are an authority upon gold-fish, you have doubts as to my sanity, and you are a *poseur*. Are these not all facts? Tell me. Don't be afraid."

I was, I admit, a good deal taken aback at such very candid observations on the part of a complete stranger. Yet what he had just said was the exact truth. I realised that the man, sane or not, was undoubtedly a "character." Before I had time to formulate a suitable reply, he had begun to talk again. And it was soon after this that I had ventured to remark I thought it strange he should make a pet of such a creature.

I suppose that I ought to say that my name is Cyril Fanc. I am a stockbroker in the City, for though my father is Earl Elmhurst, and I his only son, there is no money to speak of in our family, and our place up in Cumberland, Wyndwood Hall, has, owing to the reckless extravagance of my great-grandfather, been heavily

encumbered for several generations. I had been in Brighton on business since early morning, and, engrossed with my own thoughts, it was not until ten minutes after the evening express for London had left Brighton that I had noticed my travelling companion in the corner of the compartment.

Now, as we continued talking, I realised more and more that the dark, elegant man—he could not be over thirty, I decided—was an individual quite out of the common. Obviously a foreigner, he nevertheless spoke English without a trace of foreign accent, also with perfect fluency. His articulation was far superior to that of eight out of ten Englishmen one meets every day, while as for his polite phrasing, as I noticed it I felt sure he must have studied the English language very carefully with some English tutor. And yet, all the time he spoke without the least effort or affectation, the charming cadence of his deep, rather sonorous voice, adding to the pleasure his talk afforded me.

By the time we were half-way to London I felt as though I had known the stranger quite a long time. Apparently, too, he liked my society.

Though his remarks had been entirely of gold-fish, their habits, their peculiarities, their varieties, the countries where they are found, how they first came to be imported into Europe, how long ago that was, and whence they were imported into England, he had held my attention all the time. Now he went on to describe the methods adopted for interbreeding golden carp, explaining how difficult it is to obtain certain specimens with definite "markings" and exceptional colouring, mentioning by name the principal authorities upon gold-fish and all that relates to them, expressing his approval of this theory, his disapproval of that, until in the end I who, when I had entered the train at Brighton, could hardly have told the difference between a gold-fish and a golden eagle, had collected a mine of information upon the subject.

The more I listened to him the more interested I became, not so much in the subject of his conversation, as in the man himself.

Who was he? And what was he?

Surely he must have interests higher than the keen enthusiasm he evinced in the *carassius auratus*. Probably, I reflected, the cultivation of gold-fish was merely a hobby of his. For the more I looked at him, the more I felt convinced he must be an artist of some kind—a painter, a sculptor, or possibly a musician. I rather pride myself upon my ability to discover men's callings from their features, their principal characteristics, and so on.

Those long, white, tapering fingers must belong, I felt sure, to a man of artistic temperament, indeed, of highly artistic temperament. No man, or woman, of coarse fibre or low ideals could possess such beautiful hands. And I had good opportunities of watching them, for now my fellow-traveller had wedged the crystal bowl containing his treasure between the cushion of the seat, where it could not meet with injury, and, while he talked to me, his hands and fingers were all the time mobile in gesticulation. He seemed, as it were, to express with hands and fingers, also with his eyes, every remark that his tongue uttered.

Rapidly the train sped through Redhill and had stopped at Croydon. We were now approaching Victoria, and I stood up to recover from the rack the bag that I had placed there on entering the compartment. Almost at the same instant my companion rose to his feet. He was even taller than I had pictured him, six feet two inches at the very least. He had an umbrella and a strangely-shaped case in the rack, and a suit case beneath the seat. The latter he pulled out and placed upon the cushion.

It had no tag attached to it, so I could not ascertain his name by reading it on the tag, as I had hoped to do. On the top of the brown leather suit case was a cipher in gilt letters. I looked hard at it from where I stood,

but was unable to decipher a single letter—there appeared to be four or five letters intertwined. Just then I remembered his asking me to call and see him at his house. I turned to him.

"You have been so kind," I said, "as to offer to show me these remarkable fish of yours one day. As I have said, I should very much like to see them. Will you give me your card, and tell me what day I may come? The evening is the time that suits me best, but perhaps the evening may be inconvenient for you."

He paused, looked at me strangely with his close-set eyes, then he said :

"The day-time, especially the morning, is the time I prefer to receive visitors, but I would not for worlds put you to inconvenience. Wait, and I will tell you when I could see you."

He produced from his pocket a tiny memorandum-book, apparently a diary, bound in morocco. I noticed a gilt cipher upon the cover of it. It was a facsimile of the cipher on his suit-case. He opened the little book and turned over the leaves.

"On Thursday, at ten in the evening," he said at last. "Will that suit you?"

"Admirably," I answered. "That's an appointment then. You may expect me at ten on Thursday night."

"At ten on Thursday night," he repeated, scribbling it down. "And here is my card," he added.

I glanced at the card at once.

SIGNOR DARIO VOLPI.

There was no address. Suddenly he took the card from me and scribbled on it in pencil : " 320, Grove End Road, St. John's Wood."

I gave him my card in exchange. Rather to my surprise, he pushed it into his card-case without even glancing at it. For the instant I felt slightly mortified.

The train had steamed into Victoria station. A porter touched his cap to him and smiled, then took his suit-case and asked if he had any luggage in the van. Evidently the porter knew him by sight.

On the platform Signor Volpi turned to me. From his left hand hung by its red silken cord the crystal bowl with its tiny gold-scaled treasure still swimming slowly round and round it, wondering, perhaps, what all the commotion was about.

My mysterious friend extended his other hand, and I took it.

As I did so an extraordinary feeling came over me. What should have occasioned it I could not then imagine. The man had attracted me with strange magnetism from the moment we had begun to converse in the train, until now.

Why? Were our personalities not really akin? Was he antagonistic to me, in spite of his agreeable talk and genial manner? Was there some strange "nerve force" in him that repelled me—some mental, secret antipathy between us?

I confess I was astonished and extremely puzzled at feeling that I suddenly disliked and mistrusted a man whom I had believed to appeal to me considerably. While we had only conversed, all had been well.

Directly physical contact had occurred, and that for a brief moment only, my feelings towards him had completely reversed. And I wondered, at that instant whether this physical contact had caused him to take in the same way, a sudden and unaccountable dislike to me,

Often the touch of a damp, clammy hand, when two people grasp hands, will set up a feeling of revulsion, but seldom, I should think, revulsion as strong as that which I now, against my will, felt for Signor Volpi.

For a second I felt horrified.

There was little time for thought, however, and, as he raised his hat, smiled down upon me, and told me again that he looked forward to our meeting on the Thursday night—it was then Tuesday—I wondered whether, after all, I was wrong in thus suddenly mistrusting him for no reason whatever except that an unaccountable and probably foolish impulse prompted me to do so. Certainly I hoped that the feeling of antipathy might pass off, for I wanted to like the man.

The door of the taxi the porter had hailed for him slammed. I had a brief vision of my strange acquaintance gazing curiously at me from the open window for an instant with his dark, unfathomable eyes; of a long, slender, graceful white hand waving a smiling farewell to me; of a curious, gilt cipher on the outside of a valise strapped beside the driver, and I stood alone outside Victoria Station.

“Hullo, Cyril, old chap!”

I turned sharply. Maynard Drew, whom I was in the habit of meeting almost daily at lunch at Birch’s in the City, stood beside me.

“I saw you get in at Brighton, and wanted to join you,” he said; “but a lady we both know was in my compartment, and—well, I couldn’t resist the temptation of travelling up with her.”

He grinned in a way that I particularly dislike.

“Oh,” I said, without enthusiasm. “And who was the lady?”

I felt thankful he had not joined me in the train, for Drew was one of those men who love to bore their friends with long and tedious stories that generally are pointless and often are—to speak plainly—coarse.

"Why, Rosemary Calvert."

I started.

"Miss Calvert!" I exclaimed, greatly surprised. "Was she in this train? Did she come up from Brighton?"

"My dear fellow, I've just said that I travelled up with her. Dev'lish fine girl—eh, what? I've sent her home in a taxi. But I say, Fane, I never knew you were acquainted with Dario Gasperini. Have you known him long? You seemed awfully chummy."

"I really don't follow you," I said, I am afraid rather irritably. I was greatly annoyed that I had not known Miss Calvert was in the train—more vexed still to think Maynard Drew, of all men, should have travelled with her. Truth to tell, I was secretly engaged to be married to Rosemary Calvert. It was too provoking that I should have missed seeing her on Brighton platform before the train started.

"Don't follow me?" Drew answered. "To be frank, old man, I don't follow you. You are not going to tell me that you don't know who Gasperini is?"

"Of course I know Dario Gasperini by repute, if you mean the famous violinist," I answered, nettled, "but what has——"

A thought had struck me, and I checked myself.

"Surely," I exclaimed, "the man I have just travelled up from Brighton with is not Dario Gasperini—the great Gasperini?"

"Of course he was. I've heard him play a dozen times, and he isn't a man to forget by sight. Then he isn't a friend of yours, after all?"

"Friend of mine? No. He was in my compartment and we got into conversation. That's all."

So the man who had so interested me was the famous Dario Gasperini—Dario Volpi must be his true name I reflected. Dario Gasperini his professional or assumed name. What stories one had heard about him! If only a few of them were true, he must be indeed a most remarkable personality. And again I wondered wh

could have given rise to that sudden aversion I had felt for him when we had grasped hands, coming, as it did, so soon after the spell he had seemed to cast over me during our hour's journey from Brighton.

How little I then suspected the strange but awful manner in which our two lives were so soon to be associated.

CHAPTER II.

THE WEB AND THE WEAVER.

ROSEMARY CALVERT was generally admitted to be, not merely one of the most beautiful girls in County Donegal, but in addition one of the most captivating.

' Now that is saying a good deal, when one remembers that County Donegal has been famous for the beauty and the fascination of its colleens for many and many a generation.

I say beautiful and captivating advisedly, for there are many who think that because a woman is physically attractive, she must *ipso facto* possess an attractive personality. Though only a City stockbroker, and one of a crowd of hustling money-makers who hang upon the "tape," I have occasion to travel a good deal, and to move among people of different classes. I am, alas ! bound to say that again and again I have been struck by the lack of personal charin in many women lovely enough to look upon, and, conversely, by the extraordinary charm of plenty of girls and women whose physical attractions are practically non-existent.

It was, I think, Rosemary Calvert's singularly sympathetic nature which had appealed to me the first time I met her. That was over a year before the time when we had secretly plighted our troth.

Certainly it was not her beauty that had attracted me then, for not until I had become intimately acquainted

with her had I come to observe how exceedingly beautiful she really was. Of course, I had, from the first, considered her good-looking, but her delightful and wholly unaffected manner, the sentiments she was in the habit of unconsciously expressing in course of conversation, her natural, engaging frankness, her complete freedom from anything in the least approaching pride, hypocrisy or conceit, also, perhaps, her quick wit and her keen sense of humour, were the attributes which had, at the outset at any rate, made me fall so desperately in love with her.

Not until later had I come fully to realise the girl's quite exceptional loveliness. To you, my reader, this may seem curious, if not incredible. Yet you perhaps, after all, may have had a similar experience in your own affairs of the heart.

This realisation of her loveliness did not dawn upon me gradually. On the contrary, it struck me one day quite suddenly. I remember the occasion quite well. I was staying with friends in the quaint old town of Ballyshannon, in Donegal Bay, when Rosemary Calvert happened to come over from Clonelly on Lough Erne, where she then lived with her uncle, to call upon my host. Though already close friends we were not then engaged—though we were, I believe, already more than half in love. She had no idea when her uncle's car pulled up at the house that I was guest there, or, indeed, that I was in Ireland at all, and I shall never forget the expression of surprised delight which spread over her pretty face when, upon alighting, she suddenly encountered me.

Then it was that, for the first time, her wonderful beauty struck me.

Above medium height, her slim, graceful figure was perfect. Her features were not really classic—what Irish girl's are?—nor, for that matter, were they in the least regular. Her colouring and complexion, on the other hand, were absolutely faultless. Her teeth were very white and extraordinarily even.

But what riveted my attention, and the attention of all who came in contact with her, were her deep, lustrous eyes—violet eyes, fringed with dark, curling lashes that at times almost concealed them, eyes that were charged with the most wonderful expression I have ever seen in any woman.

In Rosemary Calvert's eyes indeed her whole soul was mirrored. Her every thought, her every desire, seemed to stand revealed there, to be reflected in their ever-changing depths. Joy, sorrow, sympathy, anger, pity, indignation, disgust, hatred, love—whatever sensation came uppermost in her thoughts could at once be read in those violet orbs of hers with a facility that at times seemed almost uncanny.

In striking contrast to the blackness of her eyelashes and her eyebrows was the bright, shining, auburn-bronze hair wound in great coils about her well-shaped head with its broad, intelligent forehead. Often I used to wonder—and I have heard others wonder, too—how near the ground her tresses reached when she let them down her back. I think that, of her physical attractions, the wonderful beauty of her hair, perhaps, came next to the strange loveliness of those deep violet eyes of hers.

Six months previous to my meeting with Dario Gasperini, Rosemary Calvert had come to live permanently in London. Her father, English by birth, a banker in Dublin, had then just died rather suddenly—her mother had been dead many years—and her uncle, her only near relation, had deemed it advisable to let the house near Clonelly, where Rosemary had lived since infancy, and to settle in London with his niece.

Personally he disliked town life, but George Calvert was one of those self-sacrificing, middle-aged bachelors whose aim is to strive to add to the happiness of others. Such men are, I think, found more often in Ireland than in any other part of the United Kingdom.

Indeed, bachelors and spinsters—"old maids" as foolish people so contemptuously term the latter—may,

in my opinion, each be divided into two groups. One is the group of bachelors whose chief trait is Selfishness, spelt with a capital, and, correspondingly, the group of spinsters whom disappointment of matrimony has soured and rendered crabbed because the idea of endeavouring to help their fellow-creatures has never risen upon their mental horizon. The other is the group of bachelors, men of middle-age for the most part, who seem to radiate goodwill and benevolence, and the group of unmarried women whose generosity and whose tolerance of human failings cause them to be beloved by all with whom they come in contact.

I had intended to call at Hornton Street, Kensington, to see Rosemary Calvert the day after my visit to Brighton, partly because we had not met for several days, but chiefly in order to question her concerning Maynard Drew, who owed acquaintance with her indirectly to me. A press of business, however, prevented my calling on the Wednesday. Thursday came. I had promised to call on the Thursday evening upon my strange fellow-passenger from Brighton, Signor Dario Volpi—or Gasperini, as I now knew him to be.

To call to see her first, as I had intended doing, proved impossible, owing to the late hour up to which I was detained in the City.

I glanced at my watch as my taxi drew up opposite the house in Grove End Road. It wanted five minutes to ten. Dismissing the taxi, I lit a cigarette in order to while away the minutes up to ten o'clock. Gasperini had said so expressly "ten o'clock punctually," that I deemed it advisable not to arrive before my time, lest I should perhaps disturb him in some important occupation.

Glancing carelessly up at the house, I was struck by the odd shapes of all the windows. It was quite a large, detached place, almost a mansion, standing eight or ten yards back from the road, and, of the eight windows looking north, no two were alike. Indeed, so entirely dissimilar were they all, one from another, some of them being latticed in Eastern style, that I could not help

thinking that, whoever had designed those windows must have endeavoured to include in the one house an example of each of the different styles of architecture of the various periods in history.

Thus there was a long window of stained-glass, another arched, with small square panes of thick green glass bosses, a third bowed in the manner of the suburban villa, another designed on the lines of *art nouveau*, and all the remainder were quaint and strange in design.

Scarcely had I finished noting the curious red-brick exterior and wondering if Gasperini were responsible for the eccentric architectural medley, when I heard a distant church clock slowly striking ten. At once I tossed away my cigarette, and passed through the gate.

My finger had hardly pressed the electric button when both doors flew open, and, to my surprise, I saw two dark-faced Egyptians in red fezzes and slippers and long silk kaftans of bright yellow reaching to their heels, salaaming, one on either side. Facing me was a long, wide corridor, rather dimly lit by a number of big brass Oriental lamps which cast a soft, mellow glow upon the Cairene screens, Oriental mats and rugs and the general upholstery of the hall. Turning to one of these men—a Nubian by the darkness of his skin—I told him that Signor Volpi was expecting me—for, as Volpi had not mentioned the name Gasperini, I deemed it advisable to refer to him as Signor Volpi simply.

Again both men salaamed, but neither spoke. When they had taken my hat and coat, however, they intimated they desired that I should follow them, and I did so.

I was in evening clothes, of course, and my surroundings made me feel almost self-conscious. A white shirt-front, and stiff collar, and swallow-tails, seemed out of place amid these essentially Oriental surroundings. Indeed, the very atmosphere of the house exhaled some Oriental perfume which was burning, rich, heavy, pungent. At the end of the corridor my yellow-robed guides turned to the right. Here the passage was narrower, also the ceiling was much lower. I saw,

right at the end of it, an old Egyptian goddess—a statue of Isis seated with the lamp burning before it. The faint rays of the lamp shone up into the face of the statuette illuminating the handsome bronze features and the nude limbs with a dim, red glow. But before we reached the Isis my silent guides, with noiseless tread, turned suddenly to the left. Before us was a high portal, closely curtained. Near it stood a little brass gong, upon an Oriental pedestal.

•Both natives stopped abruptly, and mechanically I followed their example. Picking up a tiny brass rod, which ended in a padded knob, the taller of the two men, with countenance sphinx-like, solemnly struck the little gong three times. Having done so, and replaced the rod where it had hung, he advanced with his colleague towards the heavy, closely-drawn curtains. They each placed the fingers of both hands to their dark brows. Simultaneously the curtains were quickly drawn apart, and, without further bidding, I entered.

The room was more dimly lit than even the corridor I had just passed through. As before, the lights were shaded to cast a roseate, mellow glow. The surroundings and the atmosphere of burning pastilles were again wholly Oriental. There were Turkish mats and rugs, Persian carpets, cedar-wood furniture, the ornaments and bric-à-brac all of Egyptian workmanship, much of the furniture being inlaid with mother-of-pearl. My attention was arrested by the sight of a number of curious-looking stringed instruments, obviously of great age, which almost completely covered one side of the room.

Both natives had retired. The silence was complete. No sound was audible, not even the ticking of a clock.

Ten minutes thus passed—fifteen—twenty minutes. Half an hour. I began to grow impatient.

Also I wanted to smoke, but in the house of a stranger I could not well do so without first of all asking his permission. The situation was curious, to say the least.

I was beginning to think my host had either not been told of my arrival, or else that he had forgotten my

existence, when two curtains were, without the slightest sound, slowly drawn apart by invisible hands, and my tall, dark travelling companion Signor Dario Volpi, or Gasperini, stood between them, gazing at me more like a man in a dream than a conscious human being.

He must have stood there motionless, silent, for nearly half a minute, his unfathomable eyes fixed on me.

His dress, Oriental in design and fashion, was not merely gorgeous; it was exquisitely beautiful. Also it suited his dark, handsome face and features and his semi-Oriental appearance to perfection. At last, raising his right hand, he beckoned to me to approach.

He neither shook hands nor made any sign of welcome. All the time I felt his keen gaze fixed upon me. I passed beneath the curtains—they had been drawn aside by the natives who had shown me in—and at once they closed behind me.

Somehow I had, before entering the house, expected a surprise. Why, I know not. Now I found myself in a very large, rather high room, furnished in the style of the apartment I had just left, but brilliantly lighted.

I cast my eyes round, startled and amazed.

Everywhere were tables upon which stood huge crystal bowls—the smallest bowl could not have been less than eight feet in circumference. In these bowls gold-fish of sizes varying from a few ounces to four or five pounds swam slowly round and round with monotonous movement; there must have been in all some hundreds of them. The effect produced by their ever-changing colours was most curious. I saw at once a brilliant iridescence, due largely to the tinted shades and glass globes which toned the electric lamps about the room, upon the walls and cunningly secreted in the bases of the glass vases themselves.

As I looked up the sight I saw was most strange.

The entire ceiling was a mirror, in which were reflected upside down the fishes shining and flashing as they swam around their crystal vases.

My attention was centred upon this bizarre effect when Gasperini's soft, sonorous voice cut my train of thought.

"You see here a collection of gold and silver carp unequalled the world over," he said. "And many of them I have myself bred."

"Indeed," I said, for want of a more pointed observation.

Taking me by the arm, he led me from one bowl to another, stopping before each to explain the manifold beauties and peculiarities of the carp it contained.

This fish, he said, was known to be over eighty years of age. That one was a hybrid of great rarity. The other he had bought for a considerable sum, comparatively speaking, of a naturalist in Brussels, another from Palermo, a third from the summer palace of the Shah of Persia.

Meanwhile the two silent Egyptians had vanished noiselessly, and we were alone. When I had listened for perhaps twenty minutes to Gasperini's flow of talk, "Won't you smoke?" he asked, and touched a button, whereupon a curious green light appeared in a dark corner of the room and then vanished. Next instant one of the men re-entered silently and produced from a locked cabinet a box of long cigars.

I thanked Volpi as I took out one of the cigars, and, having cut it, the man in yellow silk lit it for me with extreme care.

Then he bent low and retired without a sound.

"Ah!" my friend observed, looking down upon me with approval, "I see you are an epicure, as far as tobacco is concerned. I like that. Had I not felt sure, in my own mind, you must be an epicure, I should not have offered you one of those cigars. They are almost priceless."

"This one is certainly most excellent," I answered, as I puffed at it with extreme gratification. "I'm no judge of wine—no palate for it—but I rather pride myself upon my knowledge of cigars."

I suppose we must have sat there smoking in almost complete silence for nearly half an hour.

"I never speak while I smoke," Gasperini had said: "I would as soon think of talking while listening to Wagner," and I found that what he said was literally true. Once or twice I had addressed remarks to him. He had not merely not answered; he had seemed to be quite oblivious of my presence, if not of my existence. And, during the whole of the time we sat there, he had appeared to be in a dream. Several times when his dark lustrous eyes had met mine their curious fixed expression had startled me. They had reminded me of the eyes of a man living in a trance. I had once seen a man in that condition.

Suddenly the great violinist seemed to spring back into life. He extinguished his half-smoked cigar by slowly dipping the red end of it into a silver bowl containing water in which were rose leaves, and then laid it on a small silver tray upon the table at his elbow.

He signified to me that I should do the same, and I followed his example. Then rising, he left the room without a word.

When some minutes had passed, and he did not return, I got up, and began to stroll about the room, examining the many artistic and valuable things it contained. Presently, in a corner of the apartment I came across a little *escritoire*, almost concealed by an Oriental screen. Though out of keeping with the Oriental "atmosphere," it was beautiful and rare, like all else in the room. I judged it to be a genuine Louis Seize.

Absent-mindedly I turned over some papers which lay scattered there, and a moment later I picked up a photograph which had lain face downward among the papers.

It takes a good deal to surprise me, yet I admit I have rarely in my life been as astonished as I was then.

The photograph was a portrait of Rosemary Calvert!

The portrait was quite a recent one. I had myself accompanied her to the studio in Regent Street on the

day she had sat for it. A three-quarter length portrait, it showed her in evening dress, wearing a large hat. And of all the portraits I had seen of her, this was the one I liked best of all.

Gradually a feeling of extreme wrath completely banished the feeling of surprise I had at first experienced. I held my breath.

What right had this man to possess a portrait of Rosemary Calvert?

Did they know each other? And if so, were they on terms so intimate that she thought nothing of presenting him with her portrait? I suppose my being so desperately in love with her made me conjure up in my imagination all sorts of strange ideas and questionings and doubts. I still stood gazing at the portrait I held in my hand, when the sound of breathing made me turn quickly.

Dario stood within a yard of me, a transformed being. His face was contorted with passion. His big, black, intense eyes, malignant and threatening, blazed—there is no other word that will describe the look of poignant hatred that was in them. His lips were slightly parted, and, as he stood there, panting, his chest rose and fell as a woman's breast does in moments of extreme emotion.

For the moment I thought he was about to spring at me, but he remained there silent, almost motionless. Mechanically, feeling I must say something to break the spell, I spoke:

"I—I must apologise, Signor Volpi," I faltered, "for meddling with your private papers. I did so quite unthinkingly—I assure you. At times I'm dreadfully absent-minded. I do hope you'll accept my apology."

As I stopped speaking I suddenly became aware that something strange was happening in that room. The light was fading. The perfumed atmosphere was charged with a dense vapour. Now the lamps, blurred and indistinct, were visible through a curious blue haze.

The light was growing fainter—fainter and yet fainter still. A heavy odour filled the air.

I saw figures, moving noiselessly, figures resembling

shadows. And all the time Gasperini towered above me not a yard away, motionless, silent, a giant silhouette. In the dull light he looked even taller than before. Out of the gathering gloom his eyes still glowered at me, shining in a way so extraordinary, so uncanny, that a shiver of apprehension ran through me.

In those great globes where the electric lights were cunningly concealed, the fish, flashing gold and silver with glowing iridescence greatly magnified by the water swam slowly round and round, ever moving in their eternal circle, ever travelling on a journey that was endless.

Through the gloom of the room these were the only objects I could see, the fish circling, ever circling, until I found myself held in strange unaccountable fascination by them.

I stood there like a statue, dumb in wonder, my eyes riveted upon the huge crystal globe in the centre of the room, rigid in those uncanny surroundings, rigid like a man in a dream.

CHAPTER III.

ψ ROSEMARY'S CONFESSION.

WHAT happened afterwards is but a blurred memory.

I have a vague recollection of being led through lofty rooms and corridors, though whether by Gasperini, by his two statuesque Egyptians, or some other person or persons, I cannot say. I remember, too, standing in the middle of some road, of hearing prolonged and repeated hoots of a horn, and of being suddenly surrounded by glaring light.

Was I driven home after that, with someone seated beside me? Did I drive home alone? Or did I walk all the way to my chambers in Half Moon Street? Often I have tried to solve this problem by endeavouring to centre my thoughts upon the events of that night, but, alas! to no purpose. I seemed to be driving with somebody through the darkness—driving alone, and walking alone. But there it ends.

All I know is that when my man Jeans came to awaken me on the morning following he found me lying upon my bed, fully clothed, and, as he afterwards told me, "murmuring and muttering in my sleep enough to frighten anybody." I had slept very restlessly, I know, and horrid nightmares had filled my dreams in which monstrous, glaring gold-fish were prominent. When at last I awoke—my man had great difficulty in awakening me—my head felt as though it would burst.

Had I been drugged in that house? Or perhaps hypnotised by Gasperini? Had I in any other way been made to lose consciousness? How could I tell? How can I tell to this day? Of one thing I felt certain from the moment I awoke, that Gasperini was a man to be on my guard against.

One of the first thoughts that came to me was of Rosemary Calvert's portrait, and the thought made me restless, anxious—even suspicious. How came Gasperini to have it in his possession? Had he bought it, or had my darling given it to him?

It seemed absurd to suppose he would have bought it, unless Rosemary were known to him, indeed, a friend of his, and, if she were a friend of his, it seemed far more natural and likely that she would herself have given him the photograph.

All the time I spent in dressing, I was harassed by their reflection, and by similar thoughts concerning Rosemary. And then, suddenly, I remembered that she was passionately fond of music. Music of any kind had, for her, an extraordinary fascination. While it lasted it seemed to cast a spell over her, to enthral her completely. Herself a brilliant violinist. . . .

Instantly I put two and two together. Rosemary Calvert, an enthusiastic musician and a violinist; and Gasperini, the most amazing violinist the world had known since Paganini! What had at first seemed a puzzle was now quickly and quite naturally unravelling itself. In the heat of my fevered imagination, increased by the inordinate jealousy which now arose within me, I saw Rosemary madly infatuated with Gasperini—Gasperini casting his spell over her. I saw intrigue—clandestine meetings—passionate lovemaking—the interchange of photographs, and of secret letters! The very thought caused me to set my teeth!

My brain was on fire. This crafty Italian—I knew I now hated him with a deep and bitter hatred—was stealing my love from me, had probably already stolen her!

She mentioned his name to me sometimes, as she did that of other musicians, or even hinted that she had met him. That, of course, was part of the deception. They were conducting this intrigue under my very nose—had most likely been doing so for quite a long time, and I, poor blind, love-sick, confiding fool that I was, had seen nothing—suspected nothing. In my impotence I felt that my self-control was leaving me.

Leaving my breakfast untouched I set forth for the City. But my brain reeled. To have attempted to tackle work while this fever was upon me would, I had just sense enough to realise, be futile. When half-way to the City I therefore stopped my taxi at a telephone call-office, stepped out, and, telling the driver to wait, hurriedly shut myself into the glass box and asked for a number.

The number was engaged.

"Of course," I exclaimed aloud, my gorge rising again. "Of course, they are talking to each other on the 'phone!"

Not until some minutes had passed did I get through. I recognised Rosemary's voice on the line the very moment I heard it.

"That you, Rosemary?" I asked, concealing my emotion and trying to speak calmly.

"Oh, no," came the swift reply in a nettled tone; "It's Miss Calvert."

"What, don't you recognise my voice?" I called back, surprised at her tone.

"No. Who is it?"

"Cyril."

"Oh, it's you, is it, Mr. Fane. You seem in an odd mood this morning, judging by your voice and the way you speak to me. What's the matter?"

"The matter? Nothing. What makes you think something is the matter?"

"Do you think I can't tell from your tone that something is the matter? Why do you speak to me in that formal way all at once?"

I could hear that she was vexed.

"I'm so sorry if I annoyed you," I said quickly. "I'm sure I never meant to. I want to see you. I want to see you very badly, as soon as you can—now if possible. Tell me when I can come to you."

"Where are you speaking from—your office?"

"No, from a call-box at Oxford Circus. Who were you talking to a moment or two ago?"

"On the telephone?"

"Yes."

"My dressmaker. Why?"

"Oh," I said, taken aback.

"Why did you want to know?" she persisted.

"Not for any reason in particular. Just out of curiosity, that's all. Rose, when may I come to you, or where can I see you, and how soon?"

"I am going out soon," she answered, more in her ordinary voice. "You had better come here now—if you can spare the time."

"Good!" I replied. "I'll be with you in twenty minutes."

I hung up the receiver, returned to my waiting taxi, and told the man to drive me as fast as possible to Hornton Street, off Kensington High Street.

Rosemary Calvert was alone in the pretty little sitting-room when I was shown in. Dressed in a plain dark blue tailor-made costume, which suited her slim figure to perfection, she had rarely looked so absolutely bewitching. In spite of her coolness, or what I had believed to be coolness when we had conversed on the telephone, she greeted me with extreme cordiality, grasping my hand in both her own, and gazing into my eyes with an expression of intense happiness.

"Well, Cyril," she exclaimed, as she led me over to the sofa, "and what is it you want to see me about in such a great hurry? I thought nothing in the world, not excepting the pleasure of seeing me, could keep you from your office. You have often said so. Your voice sounded so peculiar on the telephone just now. And

why did you call me 'Rosemary' in that formal way? I hate being called that—you know. It always reminds me of my childhood. My father always called me 'Rosemary' when he was going to scold me."

"Well, as you ask me, I'll be quite frank with you," I said, coming at once to the point. "When I rang you up, half an hour ago, I was feeling very irritated. Last night I had a most curious, even amazing experience."

"Had you?" she exclaimed with eyes shining. "How exciting. Do tell me all about it, and—and why you felt irritated."

"I am going to. In one sense it was exciting. In another it was extremely—well, annoying. And it had to do with you."

"With me?"

"Yes. If you will listen to me carefully I will tell you all about it."

I began quite at the beginning, describing how I had met the great Gasperini in the train from Brighton, and got into conversation with him; how at first his personality had attracted me, but how later it had repelled me; how he had talked almost unceasingly about his golden carp; how I had called on the previous night, at his request, to see him, and to be shown his remarkable collection of gold-fish, and all that had happened afterwards, omitting only to mention the portrait I had found upon his *escritoire*. At least, I referred to the portrait—but without saying whose it was. I only said it was a portrait of an extremely pretty girl.

Rosemary listened attentively, and apparently greatly interested, until I stopped speaking. Then, looking hard at me she said:

"Have you any idea whose portrait it was you found, and why he became so furious when he discovered you looking at it?"

"As you ask me—yes, I do know whose portrait it was," I answered drily. "It was a portrait of you, that one taken not long ago."

She started, and I saw she really was surprised as she exclaimed :

"Of *me* ! Oh ! it isn't possible !"

"Why not ? Anybody has a right to buy a photograph of anybody else. Then you didn't give it to him ?"

"Give it to him ? Really, Cyril, I am surprised at you asking me such a question. What can induce you to think I should give my portrait to a man I don't know **even** to speak to ?"

I felt immensely relieved when she said this. I had thought it hardly possible she should have presented Gasperini with her portrait, and yet——

Ah ! women are so extraordinary, so complex, that one ought not to be surprised at anything they do. Still, I was glad to hear from her own lips that she had not done this thing.

"I didn't say I 'thought,' " I said lamely, "that you had given it to him, but seeing it there I naturally wondered how he came by it."

"And so do I," she replied. "But now, Cyril, as you have been frank with me, I will be just as frank with you. You have heard me speak of Gasperini—and you know how much I admire his playing. Well, now listen. Each time I have attended a concert where he has played, his eyes, almost as soon as he had played the opening bars, have seemed to seek me out. And each time he has ended by finding me, even when I have been quite at the back of the hall. From that time onward, until he finished playing, he has seemed, if I may put it so, to play *at* me. During the whole of his performance he has kept gazing at me at frequent intervals, and he has played—or so it has seemed to me—as though he saw no one else in the hall at all. It has not been imagination on my part, I assure you, and once or twice I have felt quite frightened at the terrible intensity of his gaze."

She stopped speaking, and a look of anxiety, almost of pain, came into her fine eyes.

"Did you feel in any way attracted by him, drawn

to him, on such occasions ? " I asked after a pause, during which a strange presentiment of impending peril, or misfortune, took possession of me.

" I have felt at such times, without a single exception," she answered slowly, " that he attracted and yet repelled me in the same moment. That sounds paradoxical, I know. Yet it is the truth. Cyril," she exclaimed suddenly, impulsively, " I believe there is something unnatural, uncanny about that man. What it is I cannot explain, I cannot even imagine. He is a mystery. But my natural intuition—instinct—call it what you will, tells me I am not mistaken."

I pondered for some moments without speaking. Then, taking her hand in both my own :

" My darling," I exclaimed, with deadly earnestness, " why do you attend concerts where he plays ? Why go to hear him ? Surely—surely there are other great violinists besides that man. Why not be satisfied with them ? "

" Violinists as great as Gasperini ? " she cried, and her tone was almost mocking. " Oh, no, no, don't be such a Philistine as to speak—or even think—such heresy ! There is no artist in the world to approach Gasperini—none, *none* ! There never has been such an artist in our generation. There never will be another like him. It is impossible—quite impossible."

Her deep, shining, wonderful eyes scintillated beneath their long black lashes as she said this. At the bare remembrance of the man's amazing playing her soul seemed suddenly to be transformed.

She had said that Gasperini attracted and yet repelled her at the same moment. Now I realised the truth. The man's personality repelled her, yet his playing drew her to him, and the power of his playing outweighed the natural aversion she felt for him. He had seemed every time to play *at* her, she had said. Undoubtedly he had played *at* her, and for a purpose. He was enamoured of her—he must have seen her somewhere other than in concert halls—desperately enamoured of her no

doubt, and he was striving to draw her to him by his amazing genius.

In a sense it was hypnotism simply, and yet it was not rightly speaking, hypnotism at all. Emotional natures are always highly susceptible, and Rosemary had been emotional from her earliest childhood, I had heard. It had been told of her, as a good story, that, when quite a baby, she had become so extraordinarily excited upon hearing a 'cello played that for two nights afterwards she had hardly slept at all.

As she grew, this tendency to be deeply affected by music had shown no sign of abating. If anything, it has increased. The music of the masters seemed to affect her as others are affected by drug-taking or dram-drinking; music mounted into her brain, intoxicated her senses, paralysed her will.

In rapid succession these and similar reflections came crowding into my brain. I was terribly distressed.

That Rosemary loved me truly I knew, but as no man not blinded by love will trust a woman addicted to any form of drug-taking, so I felt I ought not to trust Rosemary beyond a certain point.

"Rose, Rose, my own darling," I suddenly burst out, pressing her hand to my lips and covering it with kisses, "there is something—something I want to ask you, something I want you to promise. Tell me that you will promise, and I will tell you what it is"

"Well, what is it, and I will see if I can promise," she answered quickly. "Tell me."

I knew she would not promise until I told her, and so I urged at once:

"Promise—promise me you will never again attend a concert at which Gasperini is to play; that you will never again listen to his music. Promise me that, my darling—oh, say you promise, and you will make me so happy."

Again that strange look came into her eyes, the look I had noticed a few minutes before, when I had spoken of Gasperini's music, and so brought his playing into her

thoughts. I saw her brows contract. She seemed to be wrestling with her will, striving to promise, and yet unable to. At last she spoke.

"Anything but that, dearest," she said, quite calmly, her mind evidently made up. "I could promise what you ask, but of what use? I could not—I know I should never keep the promise. Gasperini, the man, I seem to hate—Gasperini, the violinist—I——"

She stopped abruptly. Her face was buried in her hands. She was sobbing bitterly.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CROOKED HAND.

ROSEMARY had often laughingly reproved me for what she called my "inordinate curiosity." She used sometimes to tell me that I was as inquisitive as an old woman. At other times she declared me to be more inquisitive than anyone she had ever met. "I don't believe there is a man in the world so fond of prying into people's affairs as you are," I remember her saying once; and, metaphorically, I had bowed my head to the impeachment.

I know my besetting vice is inquisitiveness. All women are supposed to be inquisitive, though plenty are not so in the least, and in a woman inquisitiveness is deemed a natural attribute, at most a pardonable failing.

A man known to be abnormally inquisitive, however, is seldom liked. People seem to think that a man of an inquisitive nature cannot be trusted; that he must necessarily be of a sly disposition; even an individual who would not draw the line at prying through a keyhole.

And yet why? Inquisitiveness is only a strong desire for information, and surely a desire for information is a thirst for knowledge! Had no men in the past possessed that thirst where should we be to-day? What discoveries in science, medicine, exploration, would have

been made? Not that my own thirst rises to so ambitious a level, if the mixed metaphor may pass. My inquisitiveness stops short at a burning desire to know as much as possible about other people's business, if possible, more about it than they themselves know. Contemptible? I know it is—in a man. Nevertheless I have no intention of breaking myself of the desire, or even of attempting to. If I had it would prove futile. The vice is too deeply rooted in me ever to be plucked out.

It was due, of course, to this ineradicable vice that almost as soon as I had left Rosemary and her uncle—I had ended by lunching with them at Horton Street—I became obsessed by the desire to visit Gasperini again, to find out more about him, to discover, if I could, what other strange things his house possessed.

As yet, I had been into only two rooms—the room where I had awaited him, and where afterwards I had come upon Rosemary's portrait, and the extraordinary apartment which contained his remarkable collection of golden carp. In a house that size, however, there were of course many rooms, and instinctively I felt that some of these rooms must contain extraordinary interiors. Also those weird, yellow-gowned, sphinx-like Egyptians—they seemed to exhale mystery. Their very silence and obsequiousness fascinated my imagination. Has Gasperini many such retainers? Did they possess his confidence? Did they share his secrets? Had he himself captured them, so to speak, on the yellow deserts of Egypt, and imported them? And if so, why? In what way were they preferable to European servants? Also, did they fear him, even live in terror of him, or were they, on the contrary, his devoted slaves?

I smiled as my train of thought brought back to my mind an incident that had occurred some time previously at a wedding in a country town.

The bridegroom, posing as a Scotsman of ancient lineage, had with his future bride been serenaded—is

that the correct term ?—on the eve of the wedding-day by two tall, sturdy, hairy-legged Scottish pipers “dressed in the tartan of his father’s clan and brought by him from his Highland home to do honour to the great event,” as the local reporter had it. Months afterwards, when he had deserted his wife it transpired that his ancient lineage dated back no further than his father; that his Highland home was a myth; and that the “Scottish chiefs,” as the residents in the town in Somerset where the wedding had been solemnised had termed them, had in reality been well-nourished Cockneys hired by the bridegroom from a large store in London, and tricked out to resemble bonnie Highlanders!

Ah, but those Egyptians of Gasperini’s were not frauds of that kind, or frauds at all. Of that I felt certain. They were the real thing, redolent of Eastern atmosphere. No Harrod’s, Selfridge’s or Whiteley’s kept in stock Orientals of that type, though no doubt they could have “procured them” had anybody needed them.

The more I thought of them, of Gasperini, of what I had seen, and of what had happened—especially of what had happened after I had found that portrait—the more my curiosity became stirred. During the whole afternoon these thoughts came crowding in upon me.

In the evening I went to a play, hoping to distract my mind. But the play bored me. The players seemed but puppets. Their conversation was artificial, stilted. Their actions were stagey and unconvincing. All the time Gasperini’s handsome, olive-coloured face with its broad, intelligent forehead, its mobile mouth and perfect teeth, the carefully smoothed and parted black hair, and, above all, those intense, serious, penetrating eyes of luminous jet, were ever before me.

All was so distinct, so life-like, in the vision of my imagination, that I seemed to feel my actual gaze centred right upon it.

In the crush of people coming out of the theatre I

found myself jammed against Maynard Drew, whom I had not seen since the day we had travelled up from Brighton in the same train. He greeted me with a wink, then slipped his arm through mine, an action I resented though I had not the courage to say so. I detest appearing "standoffish," or to give myself what Americans call "frills," but I equally resent familiarity on the part of people I don't care about. Drew I knew to be something of a snob, though the harmless, if rather contemptible failing called snobbishness is less common in the City than, perhaps, anywhere else, owing to the fact that City men see too much of the power of "raw money." He knew quite well—just as well as I knew—that friends of his would presently see us walking with linked arms, a thing he thought would impress them.

"Rattling good play, eh?" he asked as we forced our way through the well-dressed, chattering crowd. "That new comedian's a scream. He'll take the town by storm—you mark my words."

People who end their sentences, "you mark my words," are almost as bad as those who say, "that's the sort of man I am." Drew was addicted to both phrases. I could not truthfully say that I shared his appreciation of the new comedian, for the fellow's forced humour had wearied me, so I compromised by answering: "Yes, well, not bad."

"Oh," he replied airily, "you think he's only 'not bad.' You're blasé. I thought him ripping—quite ripping."

"I'm not a bit blasé," I exclaimed quickly. The pose of being blasé is a form of affectation I have a contempt for. Few things irritate me more than to listen to the banal talk of callow youths pretending to be blasé when they have seen practically nothing. The least blasé man I ever saw—I had the privilege of speaking to him once or twice—was our late Sovereign. Yet there you had a man who might well have been blasé in reality.

"Well, if you're not blasé," Drew answered, "all I can say is that you're very hard to please—or you've no sense of humour. There's only one other thing," he continued with a grin, "that might have caused you not to think him funny."

"And what may that be?" I enquired carelessly.

"If you are in love. When a man's in love he never thinks anything, or anybody funny. He doesn't even realise the humour of his own position. Talking of love—you will follow my train of thought—have you seen our little friend Rosemary since she and I travelled up from Brighton?"

Our little friend Rosemary. *Our* friend! I held my breath. Impertinent puppy! It cost me an effort not to turn upon him and ask him how he dared speak like that of Miss Calvert? Then I remembered that of course he had no idea we were engaged. Yet, even so, his tone and his mode of speech were alike offensive.

I knew for a fact that he had not met Rosemary Calvert more than three or four times at most. What had possessed me to introduce him to her, I had asked myself before now. Then I remembered that we had all met that day under circumstances which made it almost impossible for me not to present him to her. Had I not done so the omission would have been most marked, and I should have wounded his feelings deeply.

After all, though he might be a bore, Maynard Drew had plenty of good points. He was exceedingly kind-hearted, even generous to a fault. More than once, when walking with him, I had seen him surreptitiously push a couple of shillings or half a crown into the hand of some poor wretch whose ragged condition and starved aspect had suddenly touched him. And this he had not done in order to impress me.

I had not infrequently heard City men who knew him, and all about him, say he was a good fellow at heart. Some of these men I had also heard term him a fool for distributing money in the way he did, "indiscriminate

charity " was what they called it. Well, I felt that if I had business to transact I would sooner deal with Maynard Drew, in spite of his faults, than with most of those close-fisted, hard-hearted "good men of business," who condemned him for his liberality. Indeed, when I hear a man spoken of as an "excellent, hard-headed man of business," I know the man referred to is a person to beware of. He will cut you to your bed-rock price, and get the better of you if he can. And of course it's right he should. It's business.

All these thoughts passed through my mind very rapidly. Exactly what I said in answer to Drew's remark that had so annoyed me, I forget. We were now outside the theatre, on the pavement, waiting for a taxi, for Drew had pressed me to "come and have a bite of supper" with him, and in the end I had accepted his invitation.

It may seem a spiteful, even a conceited thing to say, but I could not blind myself to the fact that he hoped that at supper some of his friends would see us together. I knew he loved a lord, and the next best thing to a lord, I suppose, is a lord's son. His social aspirations were wonderful, and more marked at times than his aspirates.

We had supper at the Carlton ; nothing less would satisfy him. For my part I should have preferred a cutlet at some quieter place. We had hardly entered the palm court when he saw several of his acquaintances, to whom he nodded patronisingly. In the supper-room more of his friends caught his eye, whereupon I noticed an expression of intense gratification spread over his face. I felt I was being exploited, or should I call it lionised ? Personally I like the society of people who amuse me, no matter what their station in life. Dull folk who happen to have titles make me long to yawn, and I am bound to admit I find many members of the *haute volée* appallingly uninteresting.

However, the excellent supper he gave me, or it may have been the Pommery, made me expand towards

him more, perhaps, than I had ever done before. What if he did possess a certain weakness for titles? It was, after all, a very harmless penchant. Also it was less silly than the craving to mix with people who have nothing but their wealth to recommend them, a failing some of my friends have. We were just starting on foie-gras in aspic, when I deftly turned conversation to the subject that had been uppermost in my mind all that afternoon and evening.

"I should like some day to hear Gasperini play," I remarked carelessly. "I've never heard him. What will be his next appearance? Have you any idea?"

"Why yes, he is to give an orchestral recital at Queen's Hall on the afternoon of the nineteenth," he answered at once—I knew him to be an ardent concert-goer—"with the New Symphony Orchestra, and of course Landon Ronald conducting. He is going to play the Mendelssohn Concerto. You ought to hear him, you know—you really ought. I can't understand your never having heard him."

"You forget I'm not a musician like you," I said. "Music doesn't appeal to me, at least not that sort of music."

He laughed.

"I a musician?" he exclaimed. "Cyril, you flatter me. I only wish I were. That I love music, I admit; but that is a different thing. As for your saying that 'that sort of music' doesn't appeal to you—well, wait until you have heard Gasperini play the Mendelssohn Concerto."

"I shall go to that concert," I said with decision—in thus suddenly making up my mind I had a reason in addition to my desire to hear Gasperini play. "The afternoon of the nineteenth, you say," I added, and, producing from my waistcoat pocket the tiny diary I am never without, I made a note of the date.

"Have you seen him since the day you met on the way up from Brighton?" Drew asked.

I hesitated.

"Yes," I said a moment later, "I have. I went yesterday to see his gold-fish. He asked me to."

"Ah, those gold-fish!" Drew exclaimed, suddenly interested. "I've heard about them. I have heard many stories of Gasperini's extraordinary infatuation. Tell me more about those fish."

"There isn't much I can tell," I answered guardedly. I felt Maynard Drew was the last man I should like to take into my confidence. "He has a very fine collection of golden carp, very fine indeed. He appeared to be an enthusiastic collector of gold-fish of every kind."

"Yes, I know—I know all that," Drew said almost impatiently. "But isn't there something mysterious about the fish, or some of them? Aren't they supposed to affect him in some peculiar way? I have heard curious rumours."

"Affect him? How?"

"That's what I'm asking you. They say Gasperini spends hours a day sitting still and staring at those fish. They are supposed in some way to affect or influence his playing, to stimulate his genius, to soothe his nerves. I don't know what all. I expect it's all rot, and that the stories are invented by the newspapers, or probably by his Press agent—if he has one. I dare say even such an artist as Gasperini isn't above employing a Press agent to make his fame still greater: some men are never satisfied with their success. All the same, I should like to know if the tales have any foundation."

"I am afraid I can't enlighten you," I said. "Of course, watching gold-fish slowly swimming round and round inside their bowls is well known to have a soothing effect upon the nerves. That's why they so often have them where people go for rest cures. That's why they have them at the Turkish bath place in Jermyn Street, and at other baths. You must have seen men after their Turkish baths sitting staring at great bowls of gold-fish while cooling themselves."

"Oh, I have, often," replied Drew. "And I've often wondered what on earth the fish were stuck there for. I asked an attendant once; he grinned like a fool, but didn't answer. I hate the sight of the beastly things. They give me the hump. I much prefer to read a newspaper than to sit staring at them. Tell me, though, aren't there curious things in Gasperini's house?"

"What sort of curious things?"

"I hardly know when you ask me like that. But if you met many musicians and music-lovers, as I do, you would have heard any amount of peculiar tales about Gasperini. They say he's a crank, quite a crank. And what I answer is, 'Why not?' A genius has a right to be a crank if he pleases, that's what I say, though of course a man who's a crank and nothing else, runs a risk of being shut up. If I'd Gasperini's genius I'd not a bit mind being two or three cranks rolled into one, especially if I'd got his income too. I've seen the outside of his house in St. John's Wood. That itself is a nightmare. What? Ever seen such windows, what? No man not a bit dotty would have windows in his house like that. They say he got them all put in."

"Yes, I suppose they didn't grow there," I observed thoughtfully.

Maynard Drew gave such a loud laugh that people seated at tables quite a long way off turned to look at him. I think the Pommery had affected him a little—though he was not in the least intoxicated.

"You're really a wag, Cyril," he exclaimed. "I'd no idea you were a wag. That's quite good. I'll bottle it up and loose it off one day as one of mine. If the American pal of mine I asked to join us at supper here to-night had turned up, I bet he'd have told you that you'd the 'smartest brain in captivity.' Such a nut, he is, and one of the best, too. You'd like him. We must come here again one night, Cyril old boy, and I'll introduce you to him—I mean him to you," he corrected hurriedly.

Presently the usual signal warned us we must soon leave. Drew had grown so loquacious by this time that he suggested engaging a private room where we should be able to go on talking—until morning, if we chose. I succeeded in dissuading him.

"Well, good-night, my dear old Cyril," he exclaimed, shaking me by the hand for quite half a minute as we stood in Pall Mall. Had a policeman not pointed out to me that my taxi was obstructing the traffic, he might well have gone on wagging my wrist for ten minutes or more. "It has been a real pleasure having you to supper," he ended, "an honour, I assure you."

The following day was Saturday.

When I awoke in the morning, my first thought was of Gasperini. Yes, I would go to him again that very afternoon. My curiosity must be appeased. Come what might I must see him, and at once. Indeed, apart from my ordinary curiosity, I seemed to be attracted by the man as though in some way he had cast a spell upon me.

I suppose it was about half-past three on that Saturday afternoon when I arrived at the house with the peculiar windows in Grove End Road. As on the occasion of my previous visit, directly I pressed the electric bell both doors flew open. For the instant I wondered how the tall Egyptians managed to fling open the doors practically while my finger was still on the electric button. Did they spend their days and nights standing motionless, one behind each door? They could hardly have opened them so quickly had they been seated only a yard or two away.

This time I inquired if Signor Gasperini, and not Signor Volpi, were at home.

Again the same pantomime. The dark-faced men in their red fezzes and slippers and the long silk kaftans of bright yellow stood salaaming, one on either side. As before, neither spoke in answer to my enquiry. Once more the silent sphinx-like natives, without uttering a word, motioned to me to follow them. All this surprised

me a good deal, for they could not this time have known that I intended to call or that Gasperini would wish to see me.

The same heavy perfume of burning pastilles rose to my nostrils as I passed along the corridor some yards behind the Nubians—I felt they must be Nubians from the darkness of their faces. A lamp still burned before the bronze statue of Isis as we passed it. A turn to the left as before, and again we faced the closely-curtained lofty portal. Then came the three strokes on the little brass gong, and almost as they ceased vibrating, the curtains were once more drawn quickly apart by invisible hands to admit me.

Though it was day-time no daylight penetrated the room, which was lit artificially, dimly, as before, by shaded electric lights arranged to cast a roseate, mellow, almost mysterious glow. There was the same Oriental perfume, which was almost overpowering. Instead of being kept waiting, as on the previous occasion, at the end of a minute at most the other curtains again parted without the slightest sound, and for the second time Gasperini stood between them gazing at me with that extraordinary, uncanny, semi-human look upon his face.

"Ah, signore!" I exclaimed, unconsciously modulating my voice to suit the general "subdued" feeling that pervaded the atmosphere of this strange house, "I thought I would take the liberty of calling again to see you. The other night, you know—well, it's most extraordinary, but I haven't the least recollection of leaving you, or of how I reached home. I must, I think, have had an attack, loss of memory, or something of that sort. It occurred to me that perhaps you would be able to tell me what really did happen."

The same wonderful, winning smile that had so captivated me on the occasion of our meeting in the train, spread slowly over his face.

"My dear friend," he answered in his deep, sonorous voice, "but I rejoice to see you once more, I assure you.



“ Promise—promise me you will never attend a concert at which Gasperini is to play ”

THE CROOKED HAND.

Come in here, but this surprise is indeed a pleasant one for me."

I was with him in the room of the gold-fish once more. Everything in it was just the same, yet the whole effect struck me as being even more bizarre than on the occasion of my first visit.

Though the lights were all subdued, there somehow seemed to be a greater number of them. I cast an upward glance at the great expanse of mirror which formed the ceiling, and in which scintillated the reflections of a hundred electric lights, and of a thousand flickering flashes of every conceivable hue.

Never had I beheld anything so utterly weird, nor, oddly enough, so strangely soothing. Now I began to understand why nursing homes for patients ordered to undergo a rest cure so often provide bowls of gold-fish for the inmates there to gaze upon, hour after hour.

Indeed, I felt that if I were to remain staring many minutes at the reflections appearing and shimmering and disappearing in that mirror ceiling, and at the gracefully circling finny creatures whose scales, shining at one instant, fading into nothingness the next, reappearing entirely differently hued the next, and thus creating an eternally moving kaleidoscope quite unlike any I had ever seen before, I should very soon be soothed into deep sleep.

I sat beside Gasperini upon a low divan. He was dressed as upon the former occasion, in an Oriental robe of gorgeous hues of dark red, dark blue and gold. So close were we one to the other that once our arms touched.

"Tell me," he said suddenly, after a silence that had lasted several minutes, "tell me the true reason you have come here."

His deep-set eyes were upon mine. For an instant they somehow made me think of a puff-adder I had once scrutinised through a magnifier, but almost as this thought came to me the wonderful, winning, irresistible smile that had so drawn me to him again crept into

his face, instantly ousting the sudden, disagreeable thought.

"The atmosphere of this room," I said, evading his inquiry, "has a most curious effect upon me, Signor Gasperini. I cannot tell you what it is like, because it is indescribable. It is a sensation that must be experienced to be understood."

"The true reason you have come here," he said slowly, in his sonorous voice, without shifting his gaze from my face, "is not to make inquiries about what happened to you on Thursday night. That is your excuse for coming. You are here to find out more about the portrait you picked up off my *escritoire*—or to try to. Is that not so? Do not lie to me, Mr. Fane—for none can lie to me."

Though he spoke of the portrait of Rosemary, there was now no trace of anger in his tone.

"That may be one reason I am here," I answered, "but it is not the only one. I will be frank with you, signore. I am interested in you as a man, as a unique personality, as a study in what I will call 'complexity.' I am not interested in you as a violinist, nor yet as a genius, which people say you are. I felt I must see more of you, study you more closely, become more intimate with you, grow more familiar with your strange surroundings. Do you believe me, or don't you?"

All the time I spoke his eyes had been riveted on mine, and again that thought of their resemblance to a puff-adder's crept up into my brain. Not once had their lids blinked. It was unnatural—uncanny.

"Yes," he said, speaking, as it seemed to me, with his lips only, "I believe you."

Gradually the expression of the luminous eyes changed. From being a hard and vindictive, almost merciless expression, it grew gradually crafty, insinuating to the verge of servility.

My attention slowly became concentrated upon an oddly-shaped crystal vase that I did not remember

noticing on the occasion of my first visit to Gasperini. And yet had it been there I must, I felt quite sure, have observed it, for it in no way resembled any of the other bowls.

It stood upon a carved pedestal of ivory three feet or so in height, and the height of the vase must have been fully two feet, its circumference at its widest girth, towards the base, six or seven feet. It was, to all intents pear shaped, the apex being open and quite narrow—ten or even eight inches across.

A number of rather large, and, to my untutored eye, very fine gold and silver carp swam slowly and gracefully, not only round and round inside it, but also in and out a transparent rookery formed of what looked like iridescent quartz fluor of different kinds, adamantine and full of lustre. All was cunningly lit up by concealed electric lamps, which shed in all directions, below the surface of the water, rays of mellowed light of many variegated and blended hues. Water reached almost to the top of this crystal vase, and upon its surface a little fountain splashed. For some moments the colour of the fountain water would be amber; then it would turn gradually rose; then gradually green; then it would flash up in strange and changing medleys of tints which cannot be described. Now and again a most extraordinary colour came into it, a kind of deep purple shot with yellows, reds and greens of different and ever-varying shades. This colour, I noticed, always remained longer than any of the other colours.

My attention was suddenly distracted by Gasperini's sonorous voice.

"I see," he said, "that your thoughts are focussed upon that little fountain in the amphora: it is not an amphora, but I call it so. The carp in that vase are among the rarest I possess. The amphora was set up only yesterday. You like the idea, I hope? It's novel—if nothing else."

"I like it," I answered. "I think the effects produced by the lights inside the water, by the glittering

carp, but most of all by that fountain with its quivering hues — they seem literally to quiver — are quite beautiful. I have never before seen anything at all like them."

"Let us look at the fountain closer," he said as he rose.

As we stood beside it the fountain was about on a level with my chest.

"Bend over it a little," Gasperini said in an odd voice. I did so.

"What a curious perfume," I remarked, as I inhaled a strange scent that came apparently from the water of the fountain. "What is it? Hullo, why the perfume is changing, yes, it has completely changed."

"As you say, it has changed," Gasperini answered. "It is always changing, ever drifting. It changes exactly as the lights do—slowly, gradually."

"Oh, this—this perfume is most exquisite," I claimed. Again I sniffed it in with a sensation of intense pleasure. "Now it has changed again. What is this scent, signore? It reminds me of musk."

"It is musk," he answered, "at least, of a sort."

Suddenly I threw back my head.

"Ouch!" I cried out. "Phew! that smell is horrible—horrible."

"I told you the perfumes kept constantly changing—ever drifting," my companion said without emotion. The altered tone of his voice made me turn and look at him. Again in his unfathomable eyes that look of the puff-adder!

It did not affect me now, however. I was growing accustomed to his rapid changes of expression, facial as well as vocal. At that instant a slight rustling sound behind us made us both turn sharply round.

The curtains we had passed under to enter the room were drawn together. In front of them, a few yards from us, stood a man who had evidently just entered.

I say a man. The being who stood there, however,

was quite the most extraordinary object in human guise I have ever seen, or am ever likely to see.

His face, framed by snow-white hair, which came down below his neck, was furrowed and puckered and covered with a thousand wrinkles. His age I judged to be that of Methuselah. Strangely close together, at the bridge of his aquiline, bony nose, the tiny, steel-grey eyes were set far back in his head, and almost hidden by thick, bushy, overhanging eyebrows also quite white, but not sufficiently concealed to mask their malevolent, vengeful expression. Bent almost double, his height could not have exceeded four feet at most, and I saw at once that his left hand was quite mis-shapen, the arm up to the elbow twisted like the root of a very old vine. We had hardly turned when the horrid grin which almost at once disfigured still further his dreadful face, revealed to me the fact that his gums were almost toothless.

For some moments we all three stood there silent, motionless. Then I turned to look up at Gasperini, expecting him to speak.

I started.

His whole aspect had completely changed. No longer stood beside me a man of action, a man whose phenomenal will-power lay mirrored in his eyes, a man obviously of extraordinary personality and strength of character, a man whose face was bound to create a deep impression upon all who once looked at him. Instead, I was beside a giant in physique, yet an individual who might well have lacked all intelligence, so weak, vacillating, was the expression upon his face, so enfeebled-looking was his entire attitude, so craven, cowardly, almost suppliant, was the look that now dwelt in his eyes.

His lips moved tremblingly, but no words escaped them. At last sounds issued from his throat, but they were barely audible. Thus much, however, I gathered, that he desired that I should go away at once.

And so without a word I moved away towards the

curtains, casting a hasty, inquisitive glance down at the old man as I went past him.

Turning for an instant before the curtains fell together again, I saw Gasperini's eyes fixed upon the old man's, as it seemed to me helplessly, and as though his amazing visitor had by some means hypnotised him—hypnotised the last man in the world I should have believed it possible.

CHAPTER V.

MUTE WITNESSES.

WHEN I found myself again in Grove End Road, my brain was in a whirl. I had passed out of Gasperini's house through the room into which I had first been shown, past the mysterious statue of Isis, and along the corridors, without seeing anybody.

For some minutes I had been compelled to search for my coat and hat, which one of the silent, dark-faced men had taken from me on my arrival, and at last I found them in a curious little octagonal room, the entrance to which was hidden by a curtain so exactly the colour of the wall above and on either side of it that I had not noticed it.

Upon the only table in this room was a soft "American" hat with a wide brim; also a strangely-fashioned stick made of some brown wood. These, I at once guessed, belonged to Gasperini's visitor. Inherent curiosity prompted me to pick up the hat and look inside it. There I saw the name of the shop where it had been bought—a shop in Palermo. There was another name also, written in ink in very shaky handwriting, "Mario Bondi." It was almost a new hat, and, I judged, must have cost a good price. One thing I had noticed about the old man was that he was in no way shabbily dressed, and that his clothes were quite well

made, though of course he had not what tailors call "a figure to hang clothes."

The stick also attracted my attention. I had been struck by the fact that so extremely aged a man should walk without a stick, and the thought now occurred to me that perhaps the silent servants had taken his stick from him, and not answered when he had asked to have it back, for they seemed to be so averse from speaking. That the men must have admitted him I gathered from the fact that his hat and stick were there.

There was nothing very remarkable about the stick, except its abnormal weight, seeing how short it was, and also that it was carved to resemble a snake, the flat head and some inches of the reptile being curved over at a right angle to form the handle. The eyes, small beads of some black lustre, were singularly lifelike.

My thoughts were of these objects as I let myself out, and walked slowly and meditatively along Grove End Road in the direction of Hall Road. Presently they drifted to the two sphinx-faced, extraordinarily silent Nubians, the nearest things to human automata I had ever seen. Had they orders from Gasperini, I wondered, never to unclosetheir lips? Otherwise, why was it that they never uttered one word? I had seen other men of that type, plenty of them, silent-footed and grinning, for only two years before I had made a trip up the Nile to Khartoum. The recollections of that trip started a fresh train of thought. On the occasion of my first visit to Gasperini I had noticed that the two Nubians wore around their necks a narrow thong of plaited leather, from which hung a disc of rather dull silver, very thin, and about four inches in diameter, with an octagonal design engraved around its outer edge. They had worn them again to-day, so I concluded they wore them always. Now, thinking of the Nile, I recollected quite well seeing such discs before, but never had I seen adult natives wearing them. It was at Kalabsha, a small village in Lower Nubia, a little north of Wady-Halfa—a village famed for its wonderful temple—that I had seen

silver discs exactly similar. There all the half-nude children—dirty little imps—wore them. As I thought of them I seemed again to smell the nasty odour they exhale owing to the habit their parents have of anointing them with unpurified castor oil.

Again I saw dozens of those ebony-skinned, naked children playing in the thick sandy mud on the Nile banks, with the silver discs swinging about their necks, "a certain antidote to the evil eye," as my tall Arab dragoman had gravely informed me. He had brought me a disc to examine, and carefully pointed out the geometrical design of semi-circles and triangles engraved on the edge with an inscription in Arabic, the meaning of which I have forgotten, though he told it to me.

I distinctly remember, however, he told me at the same time that only the children, and not full-grown Nubians, wore these amulets as a rule. Yet here were these two men of Gasperini's wearing them, and I knew enough about their race to feel sure they would not have worn them without some definite object.

Again my thoughts reverted to that old man with the twisted hand. What an extraordinary-looking being! Who was he, and—this most excited my curiosity—why had Gasperini been in such dreadful terror of him? There could be no shadow of doubt that the old man's sudden and obviously unexpected appearance had in a single instant completely unmanned Dario Gasperini, prostrated him mentally in a way I could not have believed possible, had I not myself witnessed the change.

Suddenly an idea struck me, and I halted. The old man would hardly be likely to remain long with Gasperini. That seemed to me positive. He would soon come out of the house. Perhaps he had already left it, in which case——

My mind was made up. Turning, I retraced my steps, walking very quickly. If the old man had not yet left, then I would follow him when he did come out and see where he went.

Fortune favoured me. As I turned out of Hall Road back into Grove End Road I saw a small, bent figure with long white hair projecting from both sides of a wide-brimmed, soft felt hat, shuffling along the pavement, and leaning heavily upon a stick. Apparently he had just come out of the gates of Gasperini's house, which stood less than fifty yards from the corner of Hall Road. He was going away from me.

Keeping about forty yards behind him I followed him along the pavement, and soon I was surprised to find how quickly he was walking for a man of his years.

Thus we went along until the old man reached the cab-rank at St. John's Wood Station. He had all the time been glancing about him as though looking for a cab. Now he hailed a taxi, said a word to the driver, clambered in with remarkable agility, and slammed the door.

A moment later I was in another taxi, following him.

Rapidly we sped down Baker Street, turned to the left into Oxford Street, thence by way of South Molton Street, Bond Street, and Vigo Street into Regent Street. At the Café Royal the old man's taxi stopped. Telling my driver to pull up some ten yards further back, I leaned forward, and, through the glass in front, watched the old man get out, deliberately pay his driver, dismiss the taxi, and make his way, still leaning heavily upon his stick, into the café.

Carelessly sauntering after him, I saw him enter the large saloon, and followed. Being a Saturday afternoon, the room was rather crowded.

Several people seated at tables near the door checked their conversation abruptly, and began to stare at the curious apparition. I saw some of them exchange remarks, then begin to grin broadly, quite indifferent as to whether the old man saw them laughing at him or not, a trait more common among underbred Englishmen than among the underbred class of any Continental nation. For the most part, however, the people in the room paid no attention to him, or merely glanced at him casually

as he went by. Oddities are so common in this great, cosmopolitan world of London that an individual whose eccentricity of appearance, dress or manner, would lead to his being followed by a crowd in the streets of a country town as a rule goes unnoticed in London.

At a table in the furthest corner of the room an extremely handsome woman in black sat alone, a tumbler with straws in it before her. I noticed her just as she caught sight of the old fellow, rose and came forward to meet him. She was tall, dark, with great coils of blue-black hair surmounted by a most becoming hat, while she was beautifully dressed in perfect taste. Her eyes were large and brown, her complexion good, though not wholly natural, and her lips were red and full. She greeted the old man with a charming smile, then walked slowly back with him to her table, where some moments later the two sat very close together, engaged evidently in earnest conversation.

"If you want a picture of Beauty and the Beast," a young man, seated at a table within earshot of mine, observed to his girl companion, "you can see it just behind you," and he nodded towards the corner. The girl waited an instant, then screwed herself round. For nearly half a minute she kept her gaze glued upon the old man and his lady friend. Then she turned back again.

"What a horrible old scarecrow!" I heard her say, and she gave a sort of shudder. "How can any woman be seen with such an object! I wouldn't have the nerve."

The young people had continued their conversation, and I was looking about the room to see what had become of the waiter who had taken my order when I heard the young man suddenly exclaim:

"My word, Gladys, just look at the money the man you call a 'horrible old scarecrow' has got!"

Quickly I glanced again at the corner where the old man sat. Only the two young people were looking at him. Upon the marble-topped table lay a little pile of bank-notes, which the old man kept flat with his

shrivelled mis-shapen hand, while with the other he turned the notes up one by one, evidently counting them carefully as he did so.

I have very long eyesight, and from where I sat—only a few yards away—I could read the values of the notes, as he turned the corners up one after the other. Five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five, forty, forty-five, fifty—fifty pounds in five-pound notes to start with. Then came a hundred pounds in ten-pound notes. Then two hundred in twenty-pound notes. Then six fifty-pound notes. Then a single note for a hundred pounds. Probably he had counted some of the notes before my attention had been drawn to him, and I therefore concluded that he had there before him at least a sum of a thousand pounds.

Instantly the thought occurred to me—he had got them from Gasperini! Both he and his companion seemed to gloat over the money as though it hypnotised them.

Obviously the old man had only just received them; otherwise he would have known the exact amount without needing to count them. Again the hideous, sinister grin came into his face that I had seen upon it at Gasperini's. And the woman was laughing, too, a rippling, musical, pleasant laugh, not loud or in the least harsh, as were the voices of other women seated round about. Who could she be, I kept wondering. What class of woman was she?

A stranger seeing her seated there alone, taking refreshment out of a tumbler, as she had been when we entered, would probably have concluded she belonged to a fast set. Yet her appearance was that of a lady. Her vocal intonation, too, her mode of speech—I had heard her voice as she walked to the table with the old man—her general appearance and manner were exceedingly refined. I should, listening to her and looking at her, have set her down as a woman of good breeding. What, then, was she doing here with that atrocious old man, gloating with him over his pile of money? Was

she related to him? She could hardly be his daughter, or even his grand-daughter, I conjectured, and certainly she was not his wife.

I know what some women will do and will put up with for money. I know cases of gloriously beautiful women, women the world would have refused to believe other than pure, who, alas! cast all to the winds—their self-respect, their good name, their husbands, children, everything, to obey the call of cupidity when certain rich City men tempt them beyond their power of resistance.

The more I pondered over the events of that afternoon, as I sat glancing from time to time in the direction of the old man, who had now stowed away in a wallet and placed in the inside breast-pocket of his coat, the packet of crisp notes, and at the lovely woman seated beside him, the more I felt I could not be mistaken in my conviction that the money had by some means been extorted from Gasperini.

No, not given voluntarily. Of that I felt convinced. Gasperini had disgorged it, some instinct seemed to tell me, because the old man had threatened him. Therefore he must either fear the old man, or something the old man knew concerning him, or perhaps some harm he might do him. Which? It must be some very serious harm if, to ward it off, the great artist could be induced to pay blackmail to the amount of a thousand pounds in a single lump sum, and within, at most, twenty minutes or so of the time the old man had demanded it.

All this, of course, was merely guesswork on my part, yet I felt as certain I was not mistaken as I did that I was seated there in the Café Royal sipping a Manhattan and smoking a cigarette. Keener and keener I became to probe this curious mystery to its depth. Gasperini's startling and extraordinary change of front, and the amazing transformation which had taken place in his appearance the moment he had set eyes upon the old man were so impressed upon my mind that I felt I should never forget them. Gasperini, of all men, to be, so to speak, reduced to a heap by a deformed little old

man who looked at least six times his own age—Gasperini, the man whose immense strength of will could be read in his eyes at a glance. I could not have imagined a more astonishing problem than the one which now confronted me, and which, as I have said, I had made up my mind to solve.

For nearly an hour they sat there, the hideous, thick-lipped, practically toothless old man, and the beautiful brown-eyed young woman in black, whose age I put at twenty-eight at most. And all the time they conversed in tones which I judged from their gesticulation and their facial expression to be extremely animated.

Of what could they be talking? What subjects of apparently such deep interest could two people who formed in every way such extraordinarily striking contrasts have in common? The longer I thought about it, the harder I tried to puzzle it out, and the more baffled I became.

They rose at last, and I, having nothing to do that Saturday—and Rosemary having gone out of town with her uncle for the week-end—decided to witness, if I could, the end of this little drama that so interested me.

This time, to my surprise, the old man did not hail a taxi, though an obsequious janitor at the entrance to the café seemed disposed to call one for him whether he wanted it or not. Instead, he and his companion set out on foot. They walked first to Piccadilly Circus, thence along Coventry Street, through Leicester Square, and on into Long Acre. Right along this street—known as the motor-car pantechmicon—they proceeded, past Covent Garden Tube station, then turned to the left into Castle Street, a narrow, rather squalid street branching to right and left out of Endell Street. On both sides of it were humble-looking tenements several storeys high, the majority with grimy windows, and everywhere children with dirty hands and faces, apparently quite happy as they paddled in the gutters.

The old man and his well-dressed companion turned into Castle Street to the right, walked twenty yards or so,

then stopped. Halting at the corner I produced a cigar and lit it, casting furtive glances along the street as I feigned to have difficulty in getting the cigar to light properly.

The old man pulled out a latch-key and pushed it into a door. A moment later he and his friend had entered one of the houses. Briskly down the street I walked, and as I passed the house where they had entered, I made a note of the number.

With a feeling of satisfaction I turned and went back into Endell Street. I had, at any rate, got hold of an address. Pulling out my watch, I saw it was now nearly six. Aimlessly I walked back towards the West End by the way I had come, my thoughts still occupied with everything that had happened. I made my way to White's in St. James's Street. In the hall I met several men I knew, and, becoming engrossed in conversation with some of them, for a while all thoughts of Dario Gasperini and his Nubians, of the strange old man and of his companion, passed out of my mind.

"Didn't I see you at the Carlton last night—at supper with a fellow called Drew?" a Captain Pettigrew inquired presently, as we stood with others in the window of the smoking-room.

"Yes, I was there with him," I said.

"What sort of chap is he? Bit of an outsider, eh?"

"It depends what you call an outsider," I answered. His tone annoyed me. He was one of those small-minded men—the Army has many such, the Navy none—who pronounce every individual whose appearance or address differs by a hair's breadth from the conventional and the commonplace, either an "outsider" or a "bounder." "I find him a very good fellow," I added, determined to stick up for him.

"Oh, I daresay he's a good fellow enough," Pettigrew answered with a grin, fidgeting with his moustache, "but you know what I mean by an 'outsider'—the sort of man who isn't quite—well, er—you know—not quite."

"Do you know him?" I inquired carelessly.

"Know him? Well, er—no—not exactly. That is to say, I have met him once—met him at dinner. I remember his mentioning your name in course of conversation after dinner. In fact, he mentioned it several times. It was at the house of Enrico Marco, the rich stockbroker in Grosvenor Street that I met him. I shouldn't say Marco was 'high class' either, if you ask me, though I know people toady him because he's pots of money. I wonder what he paid the violinist, Gasperini, for playing at his house?"

"Gasperini? Did he play there?"

"Yes. And you should have heard the women gush about him. Made me quite sick. Can't see, myself, what people find to rave about in these fiddle and piano chaps. Of course, his fiddling's wonderful, and all that, but I like things that have a tune in 'em, rag-times and things like that, that you can whistle if you want to."

"I have never heard him play," I said; "but I am going to next week. I'm just the same as you—I know nothing about music—but I'm told Gasperini carries everyone away with him, musician or no musician."

"He didn't carry me away with him, haw! haw!" Pettigrew laughed. "Not much! But I'll say this for the feller, he looks like a gentleman, and hasn't got that beastly long hair such lots of those chaps wear. Hullo! 'Talk of the devil'" he exclaimed, looking suddenly out of the window into St. James's Street, "there goes the very man! What a car, eh?"

A very large grey car with a long, sloping bonnet was held up for a moment to let the traffic cross out of Jermyn Street. It was open, for the evenings were warm, and in the back seat, lying rather than seated, was Dario Gasperini. Many people stared, and recognised the great artist.

At once the little group of men with whom I had been talking crowded forward into the window to look.

"Good-looking chap, eh?" said one.

"Makes pots of money," remarked another.

"That's a fine-looking car he's got," added a third.

"I expect he's a bit dotty. Those geniuses always are."

The policeman stepped aside, waved his arm, and the traffic began to move on. In a few moments the car had passed out of sight. Gasperini was in evening clothes, I had noticed. Also I had seen that he had his fiddle with him. Therefore I concluded he was going to play that night, though it was early for him to start. Perhaps he was going to dine somewhere first of all.

It was then the thought came to me.

Knowing him to be absent from his home, I would return to the house on some pretext, and endeavour to engage those taciturn Nubians of his in conversation. I was curious also to hear what their voices would sound like.

It did not take me long to reach St. John's Wood in a taxi.

I glanced at my watch as I walked boldly up to the door. It was ten minutes past seven when I pressed the electric bell.

The doors did not fly open this time, as I had expected them to. They remained shut. I rang again. I had not, and I did not now, hear the bell ring. On no occasion had I heard it.

But, as before, each time I pressed the button the windows on either side of the door were lit by the green light within.

Did Gasperini order his servants not to answer the bell when he was out? He seemed capable of doing anything eccentric.

A third time I rang.

At once the doors opened. The Nubians—who now wore costumes of a different colour, though Eastern still, and whose feet I noticed were now bare—did not stand on either side and salaam as they had done each time

before when I had called. Instead they stood side by side, facing me, as though to bar my entrance.

"Is Signor Gasperini at home?" I inquired.

Both men remained staring at me, but neither spoke.

"Is Signor Gasperini in?" I repeated in a louder tone, speaking slowly and very distinctly.

The men remained silent, motionless. They might have been bronze-faced statues.

I looked hard at them both. Were they intentionally rude, or were they——

A thought flashed in upon me. Was it possible——?

A second thought rushed in upon the first. These men's extraordinary silence—their apparent stupidity—those discs hanging from their necks to avert the evil eye—no sound of a bell when I pressed the electric button—that green light which appeared the moment I touched the button, and that disappeared as I removed my finger—yes, I would test my theory, test it at once, and in the way I had just thought of.

Stepping forward as though to force an entrance, I brought my boot down heavily, as though by accident, but actually on purpose, upon the bare foot of one of the men.

The pain made him jump into the air, and, as he did so, a peculiar sound, something between a gurgle and a groan, issued from his throat. His companion remained motionless, sphinx-like still. Apparently he had heard nothing, only seen what happened.

So I was right! The men were deaf mutes! The green light that flashed up when the electric button was touched signalled the arrival of a visitor. Those discs to ward off the evil eye were worn by these men because they were deaf mutes!

I now remembered having been told in Egypt that such amulets were worn by some afflicted persons as well as by children, and for the same reason—to avert the evil eye. This, then, was why they had never once spoken. Was this another eccentricity of Gasperini's—the employment of deaf mutes? No, that seemed

hardly probable. More likely, far more likely, there was some secret reason in the man's madness.

But what reason?

In spite of the pain I must have caused the poor fellow, he had not attempted to push me back, or even to touch me with his hands. He had merely barred the way by interposing his own body. His dark, blood-shot eyes, however, had seemed for some moments afterwards literally to blaze with fury—fury the more intense because held in check. After instinctively muttering my regrets, which of course he could not hear, I turned and left the house.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SILENT CONCERTO.

TEN days had passed since the events I have just recorded.

Since then I had not called upon the famous artist, nor had I seen him.

I had, however, seen a good deal of Rosemary, and spent several pleasant evenings with her. Sometimes, in the course of conversation, Gasperini's name had been mentioned; but the thought of the man seemed no longer to excite her. I hoped, therefore, that she had at last succeeded in overcoming her infatuation for him, or rather for his genius, for I had never for a moment believed that she cared in the least about Gasperini as a man, whatever her feelings regarding him as a wonderful artist might be.

Yet, though I had not seen him, my curiosity concerning him had in no way abated. My business in the City usually called me to the office early in the morning, and sometimes kept me there until six or seven in the evening. Under the circumstances it had not been possible for me to pursue my investigations, as I mentally called my spying upon his movements, without depriving myself of the pleasure of Rosemary's society, and I was much too deeply in love to be willing to do that, however much I might wish to attend to any other matter.

It was the evening of the eighteenth of May. On the following afternoon I was to attend the orchestral concert at Queen's Hall, which Maynard Drew had spoken about, to hear, for the first time, Dario Gasperini play.

Though, as I have said, I am no musician, I quite looked forward to this event. Apart from the keen interest I took in the man, owing to all that had happened, I had read and heard so much about his inspired playing that I was most anxious actually to hear him. Indeed, during the past fortnight I had taken to scanning the music criticisms in the newspapers, columns that I had never before thought of reading, and this had proved useful in another way—it enabled me to listen with some show of intelligence to Rosemary's expression of her views upon the merits and demerits of this, that, and the other artist.

"I really believe, dear," she said to me one day, "that you are becoming interested in music. Certainly you talk about it more rationally than you used to do."

That was not a high compliment, if a compliment at all. Yet it pleased me a good deal, and it gratified my vanity. A few more observations of that kind from Rosemary, and I should, I felt, begin to expand with conceit. For though I would not for worlds let it be generally known, it takes very little flattery to make my "head swell," as Americans say. In self-defence let me say at once, however, that I don't suppose I am made conceited more easily than the majority of my sex are. "If you want to please a man, and make him like you," I once heard a clever woman of the world say, "talk to him about himself, praise him to his face, and go on doing it." I contradicted her flatly, I remember; but all the time I knew she spoke the truth.

Personally I do not accept what learned scientists have attempted to prove, that three commonplace assertions are actual facts, namely, that women have

not, never have had, and never will have, the "intellectual capacity" of men; the second is that women do not feel pain as we do—their nervous system, we are told, is on an altogether lower plane; the third is that women have not, never have had, and never will have, the physical courage of men. In all these I differ. Women may surely cite instances innumerable of brilliantly clever, extraordinarily sensitive, and marvellously courageous members of their sex whose names will live in history for all time.

Rosemary Calvert was one of those girls—they are multiplying with rapidity—who, alas! think pityingly of the women of the mid-Victorian era, instead of revering their homely ways, their unambitious, sinless lives, their mincing manner, their simpering smiles. Often I had proved to her that the twentieth century girl is, after all, by comparison, an anachronism, that her freedom of speech and manner, her independence of action, her fondness for games and outdoor sports, and her desire to cultivate her high intelligence, tend to lower her femininity. Yet she had always laughed at me outright.

On this particular evening, however, the evening of May the eighteenth—how often I thought of those hours during the weeks that followed—our conversation was largely of music. Rosemary had played to me—a thing she rarely did, deeming it, as she told me quite frankly, "waste of time to play concertos and sonatas to a Philistine in music"—and to my surprise and gratification, I had really enjoyed listening to her.

What was stealing over me? Was it music that had pleased me, or was it merely the fact of knowing it was Rosemary who made it? Critically I analysed the sensations I had experienced during her performances, only to come to the conclusion it actually was the music which had created those sensations.

"Do play something more," I exclaimed quite excited. "Isn't there a thing called the something Mendelssohn?"

"The 'something Mendelssohn'!" she cried scornfully. "Good heavens! You mean the Mendelssohn Concerto, I suppose. I can play it if you like, but it's no good without an orchestra. Why——"

She stopped abruptly, and, looking at me oddly, asked:

"Tell me—what has brought Mendelssohn's Concerto into your thoughts, Cyril?"

I blew a cloud of smoke upwards to gain time to think what I had better say.

"I haven't the slightest idea," I answered. "I heard someone speak of it the other day."

"Did you? Why, who spoke of it—to you? I thought music was a subject you never talked about? You've often told me so!"

"Let me see," I said, pretending to rack my brain. "Oh, yes, it was Drew, Maynard Drew."

"Maynard Drew! How odd! I know, of course, that he is passionately fond of music—just as fond of it as I am. He talked of little else the last time I met him. That was when we travelled together up from Brighton, in the same train that you were in."

"I remember the occasion," I said, without enthusiasm.

"He is a very cultivated man," she remarked, after a moment's pause. "I don't say he is a man everyone would get on with; I dare say many of your friends would call him 'quite impossible'; but he is one of the most discriminating critics I have ever met, so far as music is concerned; and judging from his conversation I should say he is almost as good as an art critic."

"Oh, I daresay," I answered.

"You needn't talk of him in that tone," she continued quickly. "He thinks no end of you. If you could have heard the nice, kind things he said about you, I think you would be surprised."

"Such as?" I said.

"Inquisitive again, as usual," she observed, smiling.

"Well, I will gratify your curiosity this time. One thing he said was that it was 'such a pleasure to meet a man like you'—he meant by that a man of social standing—who had not the least scrap of conceit in the whole of his composition, and who seemed to have a kind thought for everybody.' There! But now what about this 'something Mendelssohn?' Do you really want to hear me play it?"

"I really do. I particularly want to hear that piece."

"That piece!' You talk of it as if it were Thomé's 'L'Extase' or a sugary 'Berceuse,' or some nonsensical little thing of that kind. It lasts about half an hour. Can you bear it?"

"I'll try."

Again she looked at me with that odd expression that had come into her eyes when I had first mentioned Mendelssohn.

"Do you know that Gasperini is to play it at Queen's Hall to-morrow afternoon?" she asked quickly.

"Yes," I answered. "With Henry Ronald's orchestra."

"For heaven's sake—*Landon* Ronald! You're thinking of Henry Wood. But tell me, Cyril, who has told you all this? Was it Mr. Drew?"

I nodded.

She had no idea I intended to be present at Gasperini's recital on the morrow; that I had, indeed, postponed an important business appointment in order to be at liberty to attend it.

Would she be there, I wondered? Since our talk about Gasperini that day, when she had unbosomed herself to me, we had as if by tacit mutual understanding, refrained from broaching the subject of his playing, and I had thought it best not to inquire if she still went to hear him.

The opening bars filled the room, but left me unimpressed. Then, by slow degrees, the music seemed to

hold me. Soon something stirred within me, something strange, something I had never felt before. As I watched her my gaze became riveted upon her. She seemed to me to be part of her violin. Her soul was in the music, calling to me. Strange thoughts, strange dreams mounted to my brain, exciting and yet soothing me in the oddest way imaginable. Never in my life had I felt like this before. What was it? What was causing it? Had some new and hitherto unimagined sensation of delight been suddenly born within me? As the movements continued I felt stranger still. My excitement was increasing. It reached its highest pitch just as the concerto ended.

"Well, how did you like it?" she asked, as she went over to the piano and laid her violin upon it as carefully as though it were some sentient thing that the slightest touch might hurt.

"Did you really like it?" she repeated, as she placed her bow beside it.

"Don't—don't speak to me," I exclaimed almost in a whisper. "I can't tell you, Rosemary, how I feel, what you have made me feel."

"Not me, dearest. It was the music," she answered softly, coming towards me. She bent over. Her soft lips touched mine. The slight contact thrilled me as it had never done. Before she could raise her head again I had caught her, and my lips were pressed passionately to hers. She did not draw away.

Suddenly she stood upright again.

"Gasperini," she exclaimed in a muffled tone. "Ah! you should hear Gasperini play that! If my playing has affected you, his would——"

She stopped abruptly. Again her deep blue eyes were shining in that same peculiar way they had done that day a fortnight previously, when she had become so carried away by her emotions after speaking of Gasperini's genius. Once more her soul seemed far away. She was staring into vacancy, seeming to see nothing, to hear nothing.

I sprang to my feet, all thought of the music that had so entranced me suddenly dispelled.

"Dearest! Dearest!" I cried, "remember what you said the other day. Remember what I asked you. Don't let thoughts of that—that man obsess you—master you! Don't think of him at all. Drive the man from your mind. I have a foreboding—a precursory impression that some dreadful thing will happen to you—yes, to us both, if you give way to this craze you have for him, or for his genius—for the two things are really one."

I had her little hands in mine. They were trembling. Her whole body seemed to quiver as though shaken by deep emotion. Yet she stood there without speaking, her great eyes still gazing into space. Did she hear me? She made no sign that might lead me to suppose she did, and I was dreadfully distressed.

Thus several minutes passed. I still held her hands, addressing her at intervals, speaking to her in tones of endearment. How long she might have remained in this trance had we remained alone, I cannot say. It happened, however, that her uncle, George Calvert, entered the room at this juncture, and the sight of the tall, bald-headed man apparently broke the spell, for almost at once the far-away look faded from her eyes, her expression once more grew normal, and she looked about her as though suddenly awakened from a dream.

"You are back early, uncle," she said, quite in her natural voice. "I didn't expect you for another hour."

"I know," he answered, after greeting me cordially. "The lecture bored me so intensely that I came away. I can't think why many lecturers are so prosy, so long-winded. The subject of the lecture was most interesting, and I had looked forward to an enjoyable and instructive evening. Instead, I was bored to death."

"What was the lecture about?" I asked, offering him a cigarette.

"Oh, a subject that has always attracted me—the way

certain subtle poisons affect the human system. Years ago, you know, I studied medicine, and toxicology interested me intensely—I don't know why. Everybody, I think, is born with a desire to acquire knowledge in some particular direction."

"The only knowledge most of my friends seem to want to acquire," I said, thinking of my club friends, "is a knowledge of golf, and possibly of bridge."

"And of horses' public form," Calvert added, laughing. "By the way, what's your handicap, Cyril?"

"My handicap?"

"What? Surely you don't pretend you don't understand my meaning?"

"I don't indeed."

He came forward and grasped me by the hand.

"I congratulate you, my dear boy," he exclaimed, with mock warmth. "I congratulate myself, too, upon having at last found a man who knows nothing about golf. For months I've been wanting to find a man like you. My dear Cyril, if you knew how I have been pestered by golfers and wearied by golf talk since we came to live in town, you would pity me. Of course, you will say it's easy in London to get away from such people. I tell you it isn't. You can get away from people who talk incessantly of golf, that is, if you mix with what I will call the educated classes. Ah!" he went on, noticing the violin on the piano, "I see Rosemary has been playing. I suppose her music didn't appeal to you, though. She always says you are a Philistine as regards music, but that you have 'other good points.'"

"He was not a Philistine this evening," Rosemary interrupted quickly. "I believe he is no longer one. He quite enjoyed the Mendelssohn Concerto."

"I should think I did!" I exclaimed. "It was wonderful—wonderful! And it had the strangest effect on me."

"I believe I have at last stirred his artistic tempera-

ment into life," she said. "But what a lot of stirring it has needed! I had given up all hope."

"Ah! but he should hear Gasperini play it, shouldn't he, Rose?" Calvert remarked carelessly. "Though I must say there are few artists able to do it greater justice than you."

I hurriedly changed the subject by asking him again about the lecture.

"Well, yes," he said in answer to my question. "There were one or two points which Professor Loughton dealt with lucidly. Of late years, you know, remarkable discoveries have been made in toxicology, and strange, new methods of injecting poisons have come to light. By the way," he continued, turning to his niece, "Gasperini originally meant to be a doctor. I heard it only yesterday. I was talking to an Italian waiter at a little restaurant I patronise occasionally; you know it, the *Recherché*, in Soho, and we happened to speak of music. He told me he knew Gasperini when he was studying at the Municipal Hospital in Bologna. The waiter's home is in Bologna, and he used frequently to serve Gasperini, whose real name, he tells me, is Volpi—the waiter was a servant at the *Tre Re* Restaurant at the time. Gasperini was a most ardent student of medicine, he told me, and went through his entire course of training, passing several stiff examinations at the end of it. He had played the violin almost from infancy, but only for his own pleasure. Then, one day, a rich musical enthusiast from Sicily—an old man, I understood him to say—chanced to hear him. He persuaded him to abandon medicine for the concert platform, paid for his musical tuition, and found all the money that was needed to launch him."

"Did the waiter say anything about him as a man?" I asked carelessly.

"How 'as a man'?"

"I mean did he like Gasperini personally?"

"Like him? He loathed him. He loathes and

detests him still, and practically admitted he would not hesitate to do him a bad turn, or worse, if he could."

"Why is that? Did he give any reason?"

"Well, he told me things about him and about his private life—but I can't tell you before Rosemary. I'll tell you another time. If the things he said are true, I think Gasperini is mad."

"Mad! Gasperini mad!"

The exclamation came from Rosemary, who was standing facing her uncle. Her face was very pale; her eyes burned with anger, and I saw her lip twitch.

"Why, Rosemary, what in heaven's name is the matter?" Calvert inquired in amazement. "What if he is mad?"

"He isn't mad! He's not mad! A man like that couldn't be mad. It's wicked of you to say he is!"

"I don't say he is," her uncle answered, watching her with extreme astonishment, intensely puzzled at her sudden outburst. "All I said was that if all the stories the waiter at the *Recherché* told me about him are true, I think he must be mentally deranged. Plenty of clever men are, and most geniuses are supposed to be. Gasperini is undoubtedly a genius, so why should he be different from the rest?"

This explanation seemed to satisfy Rosemary to some extent, and soon she again became normal. The incident had, however, had its effects upon her uncle. Though our conversation continued as if nothing had happened, I noticed that he looked distraught. The affair had evidently both puzzled and disconcerted him.

At this juncture the door suddenly opened and the maid entered.

"A gentleman has called to see you, miss," she said, holding a card on a salver. "I told him I was not sure if you could see him, as I believed you were engaged. But he told me to tell you, miss, that it is a matter of great importance."

"You should have said 'not at home,'" Rosemary

exclaimed in a tone of annoyance. "Who can it be, at this time of the night?"

She glanced at the card. I saw her lips part suddenly, as she caught her breath. Again that strange, haunted expression crept into her eyes as she turned towards her uncle.

"It's Dario Gasperini," she said, in an odd voice. "Dario Gasperini!"

CHAPTER VII.

FATAL FASCINATION.

FOR some moments we all remained motionless, speechless.

The tall, good-looking maid, uncertain what to do, glanced from one to another, evidently surprised at the sudden change that had come over us, for we had been engaged in animated conversation when she entered.

I was the first to regain self-possession.

"Let me go down and see him, Calvert," I said. "If it's anything really of importance I will come up and tell you both. If it is something that can wait, he can call to-morrow. He has no business to call at this time of night without giving warning."

"But Rosemary doesn't know the man—to speak to," he exclaimed. Then he turned sharply to his niece. "You have never met him, have you?" he asked quickly.

"Never," she answered; "but——"

"But what?"

"I have longed to meet him, to come face to face with him, to hear his voice addressing me, to—oh, let me go to him now—now! He would not have come like this—at such a time—without some good reason!"

She rose hurriedly. She was about to leave the room when her uncle caught her sharply by the arm.

"It's impossible—utterly impossible," he exclaimed. "A man you have never been introduced to, a perfect stranger—what right has he to come here uninvited? You must stay here. I'll go down to him."

"No," I said quickly; "let me go! I know him."

"You know him?" he cried, surprised.

"Yes, I've been to his house once or twice."

"But then I am Rosemary's uncle and guardian. This is my house, and——"

"No matter," I interrupted. "Leave it to me. You know he's a crank. Probably he means no harm. Most likely it never occurred to him that he ought not to call on a lady he doesn't know—at this time of the night especially."

"Oh, nonsense, Fane!" Calvert exclaimed. "I know he's a crank; yes, but I know a great deal more than that about him, if what the waiter told me is really true."

"Probably it isn't; waiters so often exaggerate. Anyway, I'm going down to him. You remain with Rosemary!"

My beloved stood near the door still, undecided what to do. Her chest rose and fell as she looked first at her uncle, then at me.

"Stay here, dearest," I urged gently. "I will come back in a moment."

Then, turning to the maid, I said:

"Is he in the drawing-room?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. I will go down now."

I noticed the look on the girl's face, and, as I went down the stairs, wondered what story she would tell when she got back to the kitchen.

Gasparini was lolling on the sofa when I entered, and made no attempt to rise.

He wore evening clothes, a thin, dark overcoat, and

pale, cream-coloured suede gloves with mauve stitchings. In his hand was a flattened opera-hat.

I thought it cool of him to smoke in a stranger's house without a by-your-leave, though it was only a cigarette, and I remembered how, the first time I called to see him, I had refrained from smoking, much as I wanted to, during the half-hour he had kept me waiting.

He raised his eyebrows in undisguised surprise on seeing me. Then there came again into his face that captivating smile which had once or twice before so fascinated me.

"Buona sera," he said, showing his beautiful teeth. Then he added in English—

"But it is not you, it is the signorina I have come to see."

"And I am afraid the signorina cannot see you—to-night," I said politely, but very firmly.

"Cannot see me? Ah, caro mio, but she must!"

"Must?" I said, more sharply than I had intended to. "Signor Gasperini, in England we don't tell ladies they *must* see us when they don't want to."

"Does she not want to?" Or is it you—or her uncle—or both, who have told her she *shall* not see me?"

"Miss Calvert has asked me to tell you," I said, ignoring his question, and with difficulty concealing my irritation, "that she regrets she is unable to see you to-night. Also she has asked me to ask you what it is you wish to see her about."

Gasperini muttered under his breath, in Italian, some remark I could not catch. Then he slowly rose. He seemed to tower above me higher than ever, for I felt at a disadvantage. I could talk to him with greater assurance while he was seated. He was very serious now. Those jet eyes of his, fixed on mine, seemed to read my very soul as they had done that day in the train, and, indeed, several times afterwards when I was alone with him in the room where the gold-fish were, and in the room adjoining it. Suddenly he shrugged his shoulders.

"You Inglese!" he said. "You mad Inglese! You think you can prevent the signorina from loving me—me, Dario Gasperini—when I wish her to love me!"

His tone was scornful in the extreme. He had removed the cigarette from his lips, and now he blew a long stream of smoke from his nostril.

"Miss Calvert tells me you have never been introduced to her," I exclaimed, my anger rising. "By what right, pray, do you force yourself upon her? How dare you come here at all, uninvited?"

"How dare I?"

Again that irritating smile which so puzzled me. The man was truly an enigma. Was he, or was he not, annoyed, I wondered, as he now stood there before me, smiling quite pleasantly.

"How dare I?" he repeated, smiling still. "Ah, you mad Inglese, you will soon see how much Dario Gasperini can dare!"

He did not speak again after that.

He merely turned, walked slowly towards the door, opened it and left. I heard his footsteps pass out through the hall, his opera-hat open with a bang, and then I heard him give an order to his chauffeur. A moment later the hum of his car faded in the distance.

I went out to the front door, which he had left wide open. The car had disappeared, and the street was deserted. Then I re-entered the house and went upstairs again.

Rosemary and her uncle were still in the room where I had left them, seated upon a sofa, talking.

"Well?" Calvert said, looking up quickly as I entered.

"He has gone," I answered shortly.

"Gone!" Rosemary exclaimed, staring at me, dully.

"What did the fellow want?" Calvert asked with curiosity.

"He wouldn't say."

"I hope you gave him a dressing down—the impudent foreigner," he said.

"I didn't," I replied. "We were most polite to each other. He said he *must* see Rose. I told him he couldn't. Therefore he simply shrugged his shoulders and went out."

"And he gave no reason for calling?" asked Rosemary anxiously.

"None."

"Did he speak about me?"

"No," I answered, lying. I was not, in her presence, going to repeat what he had said—his remark to the effect that I could not prevent her from loving him if he wished her to love him.

"Most odd," her uncle remarked after a pause. A moment later he added: "I don't like this affair a bit, Fane." Then, turning to his niece, he said: "I don't like that fellow coming here in this extraordinary manner and wanting to see you. Are you—are you quite sure you've never unintentionally encouraged him in any way?"

"How could I encourage him, my dear uncle, when I have only seen him on concert-platforms?"

"Have you never met him at—well, perhaps at At Homes where he has played?"

"Never. I have never heard him play except in concert-halls. I wish I had!"

"Does he attract you, or what is it?" he pursued. "Do you like the fellow? You seemed so extraordinarily indignant just now when I said I thought his mind might be unhinged, that I can't help thinking you must."

She gave a little shrug, pursed her pretty lips, but said nothing.

Glancing significantly at Calvert I changed the conversation. Later, when Rosemary had retired to bed and Calvert and I were alone, smoking big cigars in the smoking-room, I returned to the subject of Gasperini.

"Do you know, Calvert," I said, broaching it, "that fellow Gasperini is a most extraordinary person. I can't make him out a little bit."

"Perhaps it's as well you can't," he answered drily. "He's a blackguard!"

"Oh, come!" I exclaimed. "That's a very big word."

"Not a bit too big, I can assure you. That waiter told me——"

"Is a waiter necessarily to be believed?" I interrupted impatiently.

"The waiter I speak of is. Besides, what object could he have in blackening Gasperini's character by telling lies about him?"

"He may owe him a grudge."

"He certainly does, seeing that Gasperini got him kicked out of the Municipal College of Medicine in Bologna. For months afterwards the poor fellow nearly starved. He had a young wife, too."

"You have only his word for that. Perhaps Gasperini could tell quite a different story. You ought, surely, to hear both sides before condemning Gasperini. Anyway, as he got the waiter the sack, we know it to be a fact that the waiter has, or had, a down on him."

"My dear Fane, there is such a thing as being too charitable," Calvert exclaimed. "I don't believe ordinary tittle-tattle, but Gasperini is a cruel brute. Michele, the thin-faced Italian waiter, described to me in detail the way Gasperini used to torture animals—dogs, cats, rabbits, rats, all sorts of creatures—out of pure love of witnessing their agonies. The reason I know he was not lying, or even exaggerating, is that I know enough about the action of certain poisons to know that he described, with perfect accuracy, what would happen if such animals were to be treated with injections of particular drugs in the way he told me they were treated by Gasperini. And Gasperini used to sit for hours watching them slowly expire in the most frightful agony."

"No, Michele, wasn't lying. It was because he gave information about Gasperini's odious cruelty that Gasperini revenged himself by forcing him out of his job. Michele Murri is as sensitive as a woman, and extraordinarily soft-hearted for an Italian. The Italians are a strangely cruel race, as you probably know. One has only to see the brutal way they treat dumb animals to guess that. Tell me—what do you know of Gasperini? I had no idea you were acquainted with him until this evening."

I had not intended to tell anybody—with the exception of Rosemary, to whom I had already told a good deal—what had happened on the occasion of my visits to the great violinist, or of what I had seen in his house.

\ In the circumstances, however, I now decided to confide in her uncle, and then and there I proceeded to tell him everything, even of the sudden arrival of the old man with the twisted hand, and the effect his presence had had upon Gasperini. To all this Calvert listened attentively.

"It all fits in with my theory that the man is mad," he said—"not entirely mad, of course, but mad in some respects—the madness of genius. I wonder if he tortures any of those fish of his?"

"Can fish be tortured?"

"Certainly they can. The theory that fish can't feel pain is all nonsense. When you leave a fish upon the ground to gasp its life out it suffers just as a man does who is being suffocated—probably not as acutely, but still very keenly. I wonder——"

"Yes?" I said, as he checked himself.

"You said some of those fish of his are able to assume extraordinary colours?" he asked.

"Most extraordinary."

He pondered for a moment, then said:

"I'm wondering whether by any scientific process fish can be made to change their natural hues. I have never heard of it being done, but still——. Didn't

you say the whole of the inside of Gasperini's house formed a sort of colour-scheme, arranged largely by means of lights ? ”

“ The two rooms I have been in did, and the passages I went along. The rest of the house I didn't see. ”

“ And those deaf mutes ? You may depend upon it Gasperini had some definite reason for employing them. Can it be in order that they shall not hear anything that happens in the house or talk about it afterwards ? ”

This idea put quite a new complexion on the theory I had formed regarding Gasperini's reason for employing such servants. The conclusion I had come to—an improbable one, I admit—was that his long hours of violin practice so annoyed ordinary servants that they refused to stay in his service. For this much I know of professional violinists, that even the most famous players needed to practise hours daily to keep their fingers supple. Drew had told me this again the night I had had supper with him at the Carlton, adding that the one exception had been Sarasate, whose fingers, he said, had for some unaccountable reason always remained supple, thus obviating the necessity for any practice to speak of. My theory regarding the employment of mutes had been that perhaps Gasperini entertained strange people, and did not wish the fact to be known. Taking into consideration all that the uncle of my well-beloved had just told me, I was bound to allow that his theory seemed, upon the face of it, to be the more probable.

“ I want to put an important question to you, Cyril, ” he said, after we had been silent for some moments, “ and I want you, in answering it, to be absolutely frank with me. It's a point which touches me very closely, for, as you know, I look upon Rosemary to all intents as my own daughter—a daughter who is very dear to me. Tell me, now, have you ever before known her to be affected as she was to-night when I spoke about Gasperini ? ”

"I have," I said shortly.

"You have! Good heavens! Surely—surely you are not going to tell me that she is in love with the foreigner? When did it happen?"

"I won't go so far as to say that I think she is in love with him," I answered, as calmly as I could. "I believe her to be in love with me, really and truly, yet I suppose it is hardly possible for a woman to be really in love with two men at the same time. But this I do know—she is inordinately infatuated with him, or rather with his genius. I know—because she frankly told me so."

"When did she tell you this?"

"About a fortnight ago. I remember her exact words. I had told her part of what I have just told you about my visits to his house. It seemed to interest her exceedingly. Then we came to talk about his playing."

"And what did she say?"

"She said, 'I have felt at such times,' meaning when listening to his music, 'that he attracted and yet repelled me at the same moment.' She also said, 'Each time I have attended a concert at which he has played, his eyes, almost as soon as he has played the opening bars, have seemed to seek me out. And each time he has ended by finding me, even when I have been quite at the back of the hall. From that time onward, until he has finished playing, he has seemed to play *at* me, and as though he saw no one else in the hall at all.' She also said that once or twice the extraordinary intensity of his gaze had frightened her terribly."

"My dear Cyril, this is dreadful—very dreadful! We must, at all costs, put a stop to this fatal fascination which the fellow evidently exercises over her. She must never see him again. I'll take her away, abroad—or do something to prevent it."

"I tried to get her to promise that she would never again go to hear him play, but the bare thought seemed

to drive her to distraction. She wanted to promise, I could see that, but she ended by saying it would be useless her promising, because she knew she would be unable to keep her word."

"And yet she has never breathed a syllable of all this to me," Calvert said, with a pained look, "and I, foolishly, have encouraged her to hear him play as often as she could. What is in his violin which casts such a devilish spell over people—especially women?"

"Are other women affected in the same way?"

"Why, yes, many appear to be. I hear it from all sides—I mix more with music-lovers and artistic people than you do, and I am constantly hearing of the mad way women, and some men, too, for that matter, become infatuated with Gasperini."

"It must be the man's personality that attracts them," I said. "It can't be the music only, and yet——"

I paused, for the recollection had just come to me of the extraordinary sensation I had experienced that very evening when Rosemary had played for me the Mendelssohn Concerto; a sensation I had never had before; a sensation I could not account for, or, I felt, have deduced off had I tried to; a sensation which excited while it soothed, was wholly pleasurable, and which had ended by seeming to intoxicate me.

It was past midnight when we parted. Though I had tried to set George Calvert's mind at rest, I knew I had not succeeded.

The discovery of this unhealthy infatuation of Rosemary's for Gasperini had come to him as a revelation, and given him a severe shock.

In the course of our conversation he had told me a great deal that I had never before heard about Rosemary Calvert's mother.

Of an exceptionally neurotic nature, she had been prone to develop passionate affection for the most undesirable people, and several times great difficulty had been experienced by her relations in keeping her away from them. This had been a great grief to her

husband, who loved her to distraction. The first time after her marriage that she had been affected in this way her husband had become so furious that he had threatened to leave her. Upon discovering the true cause of the unnatural infatuation, however, a reaction had set in with him, and he had been prostrated by grief. Never, after that, had he threatened to part from her, and each time when she had again been afflicted in the same way he had borne his grief in silence until her attack had passed.

Under the circumstances, as Calvert pointed out to me, Rosemary's infatuation for Gasperini was, no doubt, to some extent attributable to heredity. The thought that it might, therefore, presently die out, also the reflection that, perhaps, it was for the man's genius only and not for the man himself, somewhat appeased my anxiety. Indeed, when I thought again of the effect her own music had had upon me, it struck me as possible that the anxiety that her uncle and I both felt on her account might be entirely misplaced.

Not until I was undressing shortly after one o'clock in the morning did the thought suddenly occur to me that I had not asked Calvert if Rosemary intended to attend Gasperini's recital at Queen's Hall on the following afternoon, and, if so, whether he proposed to accompany her. I would, I decided, ring up Calvert directly after breakfast and ask him, and at the same time tell him I intended to be present.

But—as so often happens when one is particularly anxious to get through on the telephone without delay—the line was engaged time after time—or so the operator said. When, at last, about eleven o'clock, I succeeded in getting the number, it was only to be told by the servant that “Mr. Calvert and Miss Rosemary had gone out and would not be back to lunch. No, the maid had no idea where they had gone. Yes, Miss Rosemary was quite well. Could she take any message?”

I said that if either Mr. or Miss Calvert came in I

should like the maid to ask them to ring me up at once at my office. She assured me she would do so, and I rang off.

No message came through, therefore after lunch I went to the Queen's Hall. The crowd at the entrance was so great that to have tried to find anybody in particular would have been futile. The only seat I had been able to book was almost at the extreme end of the balcony, on the right-hand side. It was not by any means a good place, though in the front row, but it had been the best obtainable a week before the performance.

As I now sat staring down at the people filing in—for though I could not see the platform very well, I had an excellent view of the audience—I caught sight of Maynard Drew forcing his way towards his stall. I waved my programme to him. He noticed me, and, laughing, signalled with his hand the word "congratulation." He was congratulating me upon having taken his advice and coming to this recital.

Among the audience I saw other acquaintances, when suddenly my gaze rested upon an exceptionally well-dressed woman seated in the front of the stalls. I recognised her at once. She was the woman in black I had seen at the Café Royal—the companion of the old man with snow-white hair and a twisted hand, the man Mario Bondi, as I believed his name to be. Most of the front seats were already occupied, though there was a vacant seat beside her. I looked everywhere for Rosemary or her uncle. They were nowhere visible.

Slowly the orchestra filed in, took their places, and turned over their music. Gradually the whole house, now packed to suffocation, became hushed. Then a door facing me at the side of the platform opened.

An instant of breathless expectation, and the great artist emerged from it, bow in hand, his violin tucked beneath his arm.

With a look of complete unconcern—an expression almost scornful, I thought it—he advanced calmly to the middle of the platform. For fully a minute he stood there, bowing and bowing again, in acknowledgment of the storm of applause which greeted his appearance. At last silence fell once more, silence now so intense that, had I closed my eyes, I could hardly have believed the hall was not deserted.

The first item on the programme was, I saw, a concerto by a composer whose name I had never heard before. The people sitting in front of me spoke of it as being a modern work by a young musician. I listened to it and was disappointed. I could not make head or tail of it. To me, it seemed a medley of strange sounds—a cascade of unconnected notes, a post-impressionist medley of curious noises I did not like. It was, however, appreciated by the critical audience, for upon its completion they burst forth once more into applause so vociferous and persistent that no fewer than six times was the player recalled to the platform.

The composition played next appealed to me much more. The violin was accompanied by stringed instruments only, and the music was serene and dignified. Under the composer's name, which I did not recognise, were the dates 1690—1742. I noticed that Gasperini now turned his gaze in my direction. So far as I could see, he was looking straight at me. Yet he did not seem to see me. Perhaps, after all, my excited imagination played me false. With a feeling of keen pleasure bordering upon excitement I awaited his third appearance, his performance of the Mendelssohn Concerto.

Should I enjoy it as I had done when Rosemary had played it to me? Should I revel in it more? Would it stir my soul and give rise again to that extraordinary feeling of delight, that odd expectant sensation which had excited and yet soothed me so? And would that same sensation be considerably intensified?

Again the door opened and once more the genius

appeared. I could hear my own heart beats. A brief pause followed, then, slowly, the conductor raised his bâton.

Gasperini drew his bow across his violin, and I saw him turn deliberately and look in my direction. No. I was not mistaken this time. I could not be. Even at that distance I marked the keen, concentrated, intense expression in those wonderful eyes of his. I caught my breath. Yes, that same weird sensation of magnetism was slowly stealing over me.

He had begun the second movement, the Andante, and still he seemed to gaze at me. Some people in the stalls below, following the direction of his eyes, also looked up, curious to see what was attracting his attention. Again the music was mounting to my brain. I grew more and more excited.

Chancing to turn my head I started violently, for, seated within a few feet of me was Rosemary. She was wedged in on either side, but Calvert was not with her. Her full lips were slightly parted, her face deathly white. Her dilated eyes had in them the same fixed stare I had seen there twice before. Her gaze was riveted upon Gasperini's face, and, leaning far forward, she seemed completely hypnotised. Instantly I realised my mistake. Gasperini was not looking at me at all. Only Rosemary he saw. Only Rosemary he had been watching; only Rosemary he had been playing to, holding her entranced.

At once a wave of intense fury swept over me, dispelling from my mind every thought but one. Now and for all time I must destroy this dreadful power Gasperini held over my love, and shatter the extraordinary fascination his music had upon her. I was about to rise, heedless of the annoyance and irritation my disturbance would create, when suddenly something happened.

Gasperini's music was divine no longer. It sounded unpleasant, rough, harsh. Then, all at once, the air became filled with discord. Involuntarily the whole

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audience gave vent to a sort of gasp, audible through music of the fiddle and the orchestra.

And then, suddenly, the violin was dumb !

For perhaps two minutes the orchestra went on playing. The leader of the first violins played a few bars of the solo part. But Gasperini's violin remained silent. The conductor signalled to them at last. No sound was audible, save the confused murmur of the disappointed and astonished audience.

That sudden reaction was terrible. Even I, who am no musician, became affected by it.

Looking in a sort of dream I saw Gasperini standing there upon the platform, his fiddle in position still, his right hand, holding his bow, hanging limply at his side. Upon his face was again that haggard look of complete collapse I had seen there when a fortnight before the old man with the twisted hand had suddenly confronted him. And, as on that occasion, I had found it hard to believe the man before me now could really be the great artist Gasperini, so entirely had his expression, his very features, changed in those few moments.

Instinctively I turned to the audience. In the front row of the stalls, where I had already noticed the woman I had seen at the Café Royal, I now saw seated beside her, huddled up in a heap, but looking up at Gasperini, a mis-shapen, extraordinary little figure—the figure of an extremely old man with long, snow-white hair.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN WHICH I CALL UPON MADAME.

IN every daily paper in London there appeared next morning, apart from the criticism of the recital, a report with what are technically termed "leaded heads" of the famous violinist's breakdown.

Gasperini—the great Gasperini had broken down !

One and all, the newspapers sympathised with him. *The Times*, employing the incident as a peg, devoted a leading article to the subject of brain-strain, marvelling at the amazingly retentive memories possessed by many of our modern instrumentalists, and recalling the fact that upon one occasion Kreisler had actually played from memory at a single recital no less than three concertos, each lasting approximately half an hour. After that the writer proceeded to recall historic instances of sudden lapses of memory. Napoleon Bonaparte, the Duke of Wellington, Lord Disraeli and Sir Robert Peel were only a few of those named as having suffered more than once in the course of their careers from sudden and quite unaccountable lapses of this kind. In more recent times, he said, Bradlaugh, Gladstone and several of their contemporaries had been similarly afflicted.

Other papers advanced theories to account for what had occurred. *The Daily Gazette* was of opinion that mental telepathy had been to a great extent responsible ;

that the "emotion" created in the combined brains of the vast concourse present had produced an extraordinary wave of thought, which by some means as yet undiscovered had interrupted what the writer termed, "the violinist's mental train." In proof of the alleged accuracy of his reasoning he recalled to his readers' minds instances where famous public speakers had, after losing the thread of an argument while addressing a vast audience, pronounced it to be their opinion that the concentration of combined thought "had interfered with the progress of their reasoning." Even the case of Dorando was not forgotten, and his declaration that what caused him to break down upon entering the Stadium at the White City after practically completing his phenomenal race for the Marathon Cup had been the sudden roar from a hundred thousand throats which had greeted him upon his entrance. He had maintained that the flood of emotion generated within him by that sudden outburst of feeling had paralysed him mentally and physically, thus preventing his running another yard, and causing him to stumble with a bursting heart into the dust, a winner—though defeated.

I confess that as I read these articles and the expression of other views embodying most plausible theories I could hardly refrain from smiling. Yes, Gasperini's breakdown had been due to temporary mind-paralysis, but the cause of the paralysis was not the outcome of a mental wave sweeping up from his audience, or even from a section of it. The mischief had been occasioned by the steady glare of a single pair of eyes, barely visible as they peered up at him from beneath thick, bushy eyebrows.

When had the old man entered the concert hall? I had not seen him enter, and I knew for certain that up to the beginning of the second movement of the Concerto the seat beside the woman I had noticed in the front row of the stalls had remained unoccupied, for I had several times looked down to see if anyone had taken it. He must, therefore, I concluded, have joined

her either during the brief pause between the second and third movements, or while Gasperini was actually playing. The latter seemed to me the more likely, for then Gasperini might have noticed him coming along, and the spectacle have unbalanced him.

Gasperini's breakdown had, of course, brought the recital to a premature end. Rosemary I had lost sight of in the crowd forcing its way out by the various exits, but some minutes later, at the corner of Cavendish Place, on seeing her walking along a little way ahead of me, I had quickly overtaken her. She gave a little start as I touched her arm, and looked round quickly.

"Oh, how you frightened me!" she exclaimed. "You really shouldn't. I was once spoken to by a stranger just at this spot, and the thought flashed across me that it might be the same man. Where have you been?"

"Why, to Gasperini's recital. Didn't you see me there? I was almost close by you."

"You went to hear Gasperini," she said in amazement. "Oh come, Cyril, you are getting on! I shall never again call you a Philistine. I do believe my playing last night kindled the sacred spark within you, and that now it only needs fanning into flame. No, I didn't see you. You say you were close by me?"

I explained where I had been seated, adding that I had not noticed her until just before Gasperini had broken down.

"Wasn't it dreadful," she exclaimed feelingly. "The poor fellow! I wonder what came over him; if he felt suddenly ill, or what? I should have gone to the artists' entrance to inquire, but I knew it would be surrounded by people, eager to know what was amiss, and I didn't."

I did not tell her what I believed; indeed, what I felt positive had upset him, nor did I refer to the expression I had seen on her face as she had sat leaning forward in the balcony, apparently hypnotised. She now talked quite rationally about Gasperini and his playing, and in a

tone of deep annoyance, suddenly remarked, to my surprise:

"He ought not, well or ill, to have done a thing like that. It has lowered his prestige. It has brought him into ridicule. I feel that no matter how wonderfully he may play in the future, I shall never after this revel in his music as I have done. The thought will be always there—he, the great maestro, made a blunder once, he may make a blunder again."

"But, my darling," I said, "if he suddenly felt ill it was no fault of his. You can't in that case say he blundered."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"He had no right to do it," she answered pettishly, almost like a spoilt child. "Don't let us talk of it any more. I am sorry for him, of course, extremely sorry; but all the same, I can't forgive him."

Yes, women are incomprehensible. I thought of arguing the point with my beloved, but decided that argument would be useless while she remained in that frame of mind. Artists are said to be peculiar, and Rosemary was an artist to her finger-tips. When about eighteen she had, so Calvert had told me, been desperately anxious to enter the musical profession, but her father had been opposed to it. A man of the world, with a knowledge of most things, he well knew that success in the musical profession rarely depended upon an artist's talent and determination only. He had expended large sums upon her musical education, and been completely satisfied with the result. He was not, however, prepared to pay the much greater sums he knew would be required to launch her in music and advertise her largely. He had, it seemed, another reason, too, an even stronger reason, perhaps a personal prejudice, for not wishing her to become a professional musician.

I happened to be passing along Endell Street between four and five o'clock on the day after the recital—being on my way from Oxford Street to Bedford Chambers in Covent Garden to see a man on business—when the idea

occurred to me of calling at the house in Castle Street where I had seen the ugly old man and his beautiful companion enter when I had followed them from the Café Royal a fortnight previously.

I glanced at my watch and found I had time to spare. Also the man I was to see was one of those tiresome people who are rarely punctual with their appointments.

Which of the two lived in that slummy street, I wondered. It must surely be the old man. It looked the sort of place he would be likely to live in. I had judged him, from his general appearance, to be quite a poor man, an opinion strengthened by my belief that he had black-mailed Gasperini. The woman looked like a lady, by which I, of course, mean a gentlewoman. She had, indeed, been so well dressed that day that the little children playing in the street had stopped to stare open-mouthed at her as she walked with the old man along the narrow pavement.

Turning into Castle Street, therefore, I went a little way along it, and soon came to the house I remembered. The door badly needed a coat of paint, I noticed, and the windows on either side were grimed with the dirt of many weeks. After referring to my little notebook to verify the number I pulled the bell.

At once I heard voices in the house, the voices of two women. They were not talking loudly, but I could not catch the words. A few moments later the door was cautiously drawn open a little way, and quite a pretty girl, still in her teens apparently, peered out at me.

"Whom do you wish to see?" she inquired rather nervously.

I was at once struck by the cultivated way she spoke, and by the pleasant timbre of her voice. I had fully expected the door to be opened by some slut, or else by some bedraggled old woman who would have taken my card, had I produced one, between her forefinger and

thumb with the corner of her apron. I should not have been surprised even if a man had come out in his shirt-sleeves, and spoken to me with a pipe stuck in the corner of his mouth. That my ring should be answered by a pretty and apparently charming young girl did, however, surprise me considerably.

I stood looking at the pretty face peering at me round the door—rather a pathetic little countenance, I thought it.

“Is Signor Bondi at home?” I asked, taking the bull by the horns, for I did not know if the old man lived there, and was not even certain that his name was Mario Bondi.

“Signor Bondi doesn’t live here,” the girl answered, obviously speaking the truth. I felt her to be a child who could not have lied even had she tried to. “Do you wish to see him?” she added.

“I do.”

“Well, if you’ll give me your card, sir, I will take it up to—I’ll find out if he will see you.”

That “if he will see you” was delicious. I almost smiled. I might have been calling upon a Cabinet Minister, and not inquiring for an old man who looked as though he dwelt in a Rowton House.

“Will you? Thanks so much,” I said, as I dived into my pocket for my cardcase. The girl opened the door wider, and I noticed that she was neatly, though not expensively, dressed. As she took the card I saw that her hands were small, delicate and very white, the fingers slender and tapering, the nails well-shaped. Who on earth could she be, living in this slum and answering the door? It never crossed my mind that perhaps she was the servant.

I must have waited several minutes before she returned. It struck me that her face was now rather flushed, that her eyes looked brighter than when she had gone upstairs.

“I am sorry,” she said in her soft voice, “but Signor Bondi regrets very much that he cannot see you just at

present. However, if you would like to see Madame, she will be quite charmed, and she will give you a cup of tea if you'd like one."

Really, this was delightful! The offer of the cup of tea "if I would like one," and the naive way the little doorkeeper had suggested it in particular tickled me immensely. I was about to enter, when suddenly I stopped.

Was this a ruse? Was it a trap to entice me within that house?

Bondi was a blackmailer, I had decided.

And "Madame," who was "Madame?" Not the old man's wife clearly, or the girl would have referred to her as "the Signora." Was it prudent to go into a strange house to see a woman I had never spoken to, and of whom I knew nothing whatsoever—except that I had seen her hobnobbing with a horrible old man I practically knew to be a blackmailer?

No, it was not prudent. On the contrary, it was the height of folly. If any man had told me he had done such a thing I should, I know, have set him down as a fool, and possibly told him so.

Then my "besetting vice," as Rosemary called it, again asserted itself. I must, I would go up and see "Madame"—and have that cup of tea! It might be drugged for aught I knew. Well, and if it were? I should sleep it off! I had nothing on me worth stealing, and very little money. I felt suddenly reckless. Let Prudence hang herself. I would take a sporting chance.

The little girl was standing in the doorway looking up at me, and awaiting my answer. The sweet expression in those rich brown eyes of hers appealed to me intensely. They formed a serious rival to Rosemary's deep blue eyes. That thought flashed upon me, but I instant dispelled it.

"It is most kind of Madame," I said with a smile. "Yes, I will come up with pleasure."

Ah! could I have but foreseen the evil consequences of

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that fateful meeting, I wonder if I would have dared to ascend those stairs?

I think not. And the reason—well you, my reader, will quickly learn for yourself.

But pause, place yourself in my position for a single moment, and ask yourself whether you would not have acted as I did—even though against your own instinct, whether you would not have attempted to probe the mystery, and thus satisfy your own curiosity.

CHAPTER IX.

MADAME IS COMMUNICATIVE.

THE room into which I was admitted was on the first floor, its two windows overlooking Castle Street, and the aspect from them gloomy in the extreme.

Below were noisy grubby children, apparently enjoying life. A few yards further along horse vans were with much clatter being backed into line against the kerb beneath the large wooden double doors of what appeared to be a warehouse. So narrow was the street at that point that when the vans were at last in line, the horses harnessed to them stood with their forefeet upon the pavement opposite the warehouse, their noses touching the wall. Facing the window where I now stood staring out was a high, blank brick wall. It had at one time been red. Now it looked as though somebody had dusted it with soot.

In strange contrast to all this was the apartment in which I found myself. I was alone, for, after admitting me, the girl had gone out abruptly and shut the door. It was quite a large room, with a high ceiling. Furnished expensively and in perfect taste, everything in it was modern and apparently new. Set near the window, so that the light should fall from behind over the player's left shoulder, was a grand piano, open, and upon the stand some music. Nowhere about were any of the useless knick-knacks one sees so often in drawing-rooms,

but upon the mantelpiece were some framed portraits, and upon a table books with the appearance of having been recently disturbed.

One can generally gauge people's tastes by examining the books they read. I picked up some of the volumes, and glanced at their titles. "Taylor on Poisons," and "Tanner on Poisons," were two of them. The third was "Secrets of the State of Venice," mostly in Latin, a work which, I knew, dealt with the poisons used in Venice by the famous Council of Ten. There was also an old MS. in a mediæval Italian, on vellum, bound in heavy oaken boards much worm-eaten, and bound with a large brass clasp. I know something of old books, and I judged this to be an ancient tome used probably by the alchemists of long ago, most likely about the fifteenth century. Another book I looked at also surprised me. This was quite a modern work, "The Sexual Life of our Time in its Relation to Modern Civilisation," by Iwan Bloch, M.D.—truly a strange volume to find in an apartment which appeared to be a lady's boudoir.

Iwan Bloch! The name sounded familiar. I racked my brain, and recollection came to me. This was a book which the courts had decided should not be in the hands of the public—a purely medical work.

The extreme cleanliness of the room and everything in it was in striking contrast to the squalor of the street outside. The windows downstairs had been grimy, with splashes of stale mud still upon them, but here the panes were polished until they looked like crystal. A silver tray stood upon a table, and on it a silver tea-service. The water in the urn, heated by the flame of a spirit lamp, sang merrily. Near by were dainty things to eat.

Who could my mysterious hostess be, I wondered again. Absent-mindedly, as I stood by the mantelpiece, I glanced at the names on the visiting-cards pushed between the glass and the bog-oak frame of the over-mantel mirror. They were mostly foreign names—chiefly Italian. One card bore the name, "Cuthbert

Quain," and on it was written in pencil, "St. James's Park Station, 6.30, Wednesday."

Where had I heard that name quite recently?

I started. I had seen it in the newspapers that very day. A man called Cuthbert Quain had disappeared some days previously. A reward was offered for information which would lead to his discovery, and the police were in search of him. He was quite a well-known man, a Lancashire cotton-broker, an ex-Mayor of Manchester. Most extraordinary that I should have come across his card like this! I pulled it out of the mirror to see if there were any writing on the back. Just as I did so I heard the door handle turn. There was not time to put back the card, so I pushed it hurriedly into my pocket.

With a sweet smile the beautiful woman I had seen with Bondi at the Café Royal advanced to greet me. As on the previous occasions when I had seen her, she was exquisitely dressed, though not in the least overdressed. She wore a gown of nunlike grey of very fine voile, veiled and slightly draped with silk ninon of the same cloudy shade, which seemed to create a nimbus around her as her body swayed ever so little as she moved, and this nun-like creation was relieved by a high, swathed belt of gorgeous orange, the indescribable flame-colour that one sees in some azaleas, and further by the deep, pointed collar of lace which completed the wonderful gown. Her shining blue-black hair was drawn up in great coils, and away from her white forehead in a style that was most becoming. I smiled to myself as I noted all this. I had so often heard Rosemary talking about dress that I had come to have quite a technical knowledge of "gowns" and "creations."

"How pleased I am to meet you at last," she said with a slightly foreign accent as she took my hand and held it. "We were speaking of you not an hour ago."

I paused before answering, taken aback by this remark. It had so astonished me that I could not think

what to say. And what did she mean by "we?" Finally I said, rather inconsequently:

"Were you really?"

"Yes," she answered. "It is quite fortunate you should have called."

"Ah," I said. Whatever did she mean? I wondered. Why was it "fortunate" I had called—for her, or for me? Yes, she certainly had very beautiful eyes. They were the same colour as the little girl's, and rather like hers. Probably, therefore, the little girl was her daughter.

"Mr. Maynard Drew frequently speaks of you," she went on suddenly. I felt she was finding me a poor conversationalist.

"Ah, Maynard Drew!" I exclaimed, snatching at something I could talk about. "You know him? He is a friend of yours?"

"Hardly a friend. I should say an intimate acquaintance. He tells me you and he are such friends."

This statement annoyed me a little. I had no desire to be considered an intimate friend of Drew's. Drew was all right, a very good fellow in some respects, and up to a certain point I liked him very much. But only up to a point.

"Yes, I know Drew pretty well," I said. "I meet him in the City."

She seemed rather surprised at my lack of enthusiasm.

"Has he never mentioned me to you?" she asked suddenly.

I felt embarrassed. Then, thinking it best to speak plainly, I said:

"He may have spoken of you, but—" I smiled, "—well, you see, I haven't the pleasure of knowing your name."

She laughed outright.

"How very foolish of me!" she said. "My name is Louise Joubert."

The name conveyed nothing to me, nor did I recollect

having heard it before. I noticed she wore a wedding ring. Out of politeness, however, I exclaimed :

"Oh, now, naturally, I know. I have heard so much about you, Madame. I am so pleased to meet you."

She looked hard at me for some moments before she spoke again.

"Now come and have some tea," was her next remark, as she drew the table with the tray a little nearer to the settee upon which she was seated. "Or shall I get you something stronger?"

"I prefer tea," I answered. That, at any rate, was the truth.

"What is it you want to see Mario about?" she asked without looking at me, when she had given me the tea.

What did I want to see Mario about? I had not the remotest idea.

"Oh," I stammered quickly. "Gasperini, the famous violinist, you know, asked me to call to ask him something."

"Gasperini did!"

The expression of surprise that had shot into her eyes was quickly dispelled.

"Yes," I said, determined to brazen it out. "It is not a matter of importance, and I can quite well look in some other day when I am passing."

"Is it anything that I can tell Mario?"

"Well, no," I said thoughtfully. "To be quite candid, it is a matter of private business."

Again she looked hard at me, just as she had done when I told her I had heard so much about her. Did she guess that I was lying? I sincerely hoped she didn't. I hate telling lies to a pretty woman.

"How long have you known Maynard Drew?" I asked abruptly. I didn't like her looking at me like that. Somehow it made me feel uneasy.

"Not very long," she answered. "He does some business for me in the City. A friend of mine introduced us."

"And you couldn't have a better man," I declared, glad of the opportunity of saying a good word for Drew in return for the complimentary things he had said to Rosemary about me. "He's a man of excellent judgment, also a man of absolute integrity. Some City men are neither," I ended with a smile.

"So I've been told," she replied quite seriously. "I do like a man whose word can be depended upon."

"Drew is extremely fond of music," I said. "I see that you, too, are a musician."

"And you?"

"Oh, I can hardly tell one note from another."

At that moment the raucous cries of newspaper-boys selling evening papers in Endell Street were borne in through the open window. Instinctively we both listened. It was a still evening, and the shouts could be heard distinctly:

"The missing Manchester man—Spe-shall! Strange Story—Spe-shall!"

I saw Madame glance up at the mirror. Then she rose carelessly and stood with her back to me, before the mantel. She was looking at the cards stuck in the frame. She missed the card of Cuthbert Quain which I had pushed into my pocket!

"I'm trying to find you some cigarettes," she said calmly, moving one of the framed portraits which stood upon the mantel-shelf. "Someone must have taken them away."

So my handsome companion could also tell a falsehood when it suited her! That, at any rate, might be worth remembering.

"Pray don't trouble," I exclaimed, producing my cigarette case. "I have some on me."

Her eyes had a troubled look now. The loss of that card evidently made her uneasy. Did she suspect that I had taken it?

My attention was distracted by the entry of the pretty girl.

"Mr. Fane—this is my little daughter," my hostess

said. "She is also my little waiting-maid, for at present we have no servant. And I don't mind telling you that she is better than any servant."

"I have already had the pleasure of meeting your daughter," I replied. "She opened the door to me."

"Ah, of course!" my beautiful hostess answered. "I forgot we have been several days without a servant. When one lives in a slum of this kind it is so hard to find a maid who will stay, other than some quite common girl, and I can't bear the sight of dirty servants. Marie," she said, turning to the child, "before you take away the tea, will you run out and get me an evening paper? I want the latest edition."

I felt it was time for me to go, and yet I particularly wanted to see the old man, whom I had reason to suppose was in the house.

"Well, I must be going," I said, glancing about for my hat and stick, which I had brought into the room with me. "Do you think Signor Bondi may have a moment to spare now?"

"I doubt it," she answered quickly. "But I will find out if you will excuse me for a moment."

She left the room, and now I was again alone, for the little girl had gone to buy a paper. Madame Joubert was absent several minutes. It was not until she had returned that I remembered, with a twinge of annoyance, that I had forgotten to replace the card—Cuthbert Quain's card—in the overmantel mirror, as I intended. I had it in my pocket still. Then I reflected that perhaps it was as well I had forgotten, seeing that, as my hostess had evidently missed it, she would have been surprised at seeing it there again, and might have suspected me of removing it.

"If you will come into the other room," Madame asked, "Mario will see you now."

I followed her and found the old man hunched up in a great armchair before a blazing fire. The room, like the one I had just left, was spotlessly clean, but its atmosphere was stifling. I wondered how anyone could bear

the heat of a fire in the warm weather we were then enjoying. He wore no glasses, yet appeared to be reading the copy of the *Secolo* he held before him. As soon as I had entered, and Madame Joubert had left us alone, shutting the door behind her, he peered at me out of his little eyes, and said sharply in his wheezy voice with a marked foreign accent :

"Well—what's this business he has sent you to speak to me about?"

My thoughts had been so full of other things that I had completely forgotten that I had told Madame Joubert I had come to give some message of Gasperini's to the old man. My inventive faculty, however, again came to my rescue.

"You mean Gasperini?" I said, in order to gain time. "It is not of great importance. I happened to tell him when I saw him this morning that I should be in this direction some time during the day, so he asked me to look in here if I had time, to tell you he is sorry he will be unable to keep the appointment he made with you."

It was an arrow shot at random, but to my surprise it hit the mark.

"The appointment *he* made with *me*?" Bondi echoed, and his eyes seemed to glitter. "It was *I* who made the appointment!"

"Ah! my mistake, I expect," I said quickly. "Yes, that, I think, was what he did say."

"But was that all he said?"

"I think so."

"I understood Louise to say there was some private business you wished to see me about!"

I bit my tongue. I felt that my carelessness would some day be my undoing if I let it grow on me.

"You are quite right," I answered apologetically. "He also asked me to say that the matter you and he spoke about the other day cannot be decided at once, but that he will do the best he can, and let you know immediately. I asked him if he would not be more

explicit, and he said 'No,' that you would understand. He asked me not to mention this unless I saw you personally. Otherwise I should have given the message to Madame to give to you."

The old man sat quite still without speaking. At last, turning his beady eyes upon me again, he said :

"I hope you are not inventing this story, young man."

"Inventing it!" I exclaimed indignantly. "Really, Signor Bondi, I am rather surprised at your saying a thing like that."

"Then all I can say," he answered, "is that I have not the vaguest idea of what he was talking about. I have no recollection of discussing any matter with him that was going to be arranged, and I never forget—in spite of my great age—I never forget."

This time my arrow had evidently not hit the mark.

"I have something to ask you, young man," he said some moments later. "How long have you known Gasperini?"

"Quite a short time," I answered.

"And you know him well?"

"On the contrary, I know him hardly at all."

"Do you know anything about him—anything at all about his past life?"

"Nothing—absolutely nothing."

Slowly the horrible grin I had seen on his face that day at Gasperini's again spread over his features, and the two yellow tusks became visible as his lips were drawn apart.

"And I—I know all about him," he laughed in a harsh tone. "Think of that! I know all about Dario Volpi, who now calls himself Gasperini. I can remember when he was born; I remember when his parents were born. I knew them both intimately. Yes, I can remember his father and his grandfather. How proud they would all have felt could they have foreseen what this descendant of theirs would be!"

"He certainly is a genius," I exclaimed.

With difficulty the old man turned his head a little. The evil grin had left his face, and for that I felt thank-

ful. Now his little rat-like eyes seemed to burn in their sockets as they became fixed on mine from the depth of those dark chasms beneath his bushy brows.

"A genius—yes," he seemed to spit the words across at me. "But also a monster—a horrible monster!"

I was amazed. I had not imagined that in using the word proud he meant it ironically. I had quite thought he referred to the violinist's talent.

"Listen!" he went on, his voice like a croak, and his accent even the more pronounced, "take my advice, and have nothing to do with Gasperini, never speak to him, keep away from him—far away from him. I am a very old man; you can have no idea what my age is, but I tell you I knew Gasperini's parents and his grandparents. They were criminals, too. His father and his grandfather also were what you English call 'geniuses,' but geniuses of a very different kind. Heredity! Ah, if ever there were a case of heredity you have it there in Volpi. Gasperini—phut!" he spat upon the floor. "If only I could find a man who knows what I know of him—a man, a woman, anybody who was intimately acquainted with his private life in those early days—. But I have tried to, and I cannot. Plenty knew him, but only his fellow-students at Bologna. And they knew nothing of his private life."

Instantly my mind flashed back to my conversation with George Calvert; to those things which the waiter, Michele Murri, had told him concerning Gasperini; to the things Gasperini was said by Murri to have done while a student at the Municipal College at Bologna, and his alleged cruelty. Should I tell the old man? Should I be making mischief if I did? Had Murri told the truth, or had he lied—lied out of spite, out of hatred for Gasperini and his deep desire for revenge? No, George Calvert was not a man to believe idle gossip. He was one of the most level-headed as well as most charitable men I knew. He would not have believed Murri's statements had he not known them to be true. Surely, then, there must be some horrible skeleton in the

cupboard of this man Gasperini that all London raved about solely because of his genius. "Criminal" was the word Mario Bondi had used. "Criminal" was the word Calvert had told me Michele Murri had applied to Gasperini. Then I thought of Rosemary, of her strange infatuation for this man they pronounced to be a criminal infatuation which might end—who could foretell how it might not end, to what horror it might not lead? And to that thought was linked the burning feeling of jealousy which, until now, I had succeeded in keeping under restraint.

My mind was made up. Quickly I gathered my wandering thoughts.

"Signor Bondi," I said as calmly as I could, "I can bring to you a man who knew Volpi intimately, a man of your own nationality, a man whose hatred of Gasperini is as deep-rooted even, if not deeper, than your own."

At that instant the old man seemed transformed. Once more those beady, rat-like eyes peered out at me. In my face he read the truth.

"Bring him to me," he said in a hard, determined voice. "Let me hear what he says—and our testimony shall condemn this great genius who has taken the world of London by storm!"

CHAPTER X.

THE MYSTERY OF CUTHBERT QUAIN.

As I walked briskly in the direction of Covent Garden, my thoughts were chiefly of Rosemary. That she should be obsessed by thoughts of Gasperini was sufficiently deplorable, but if Gasperini were a man to be shunned, ostracised! I held my breath.

Happening to put my hand into my pocket, I felt there the card I had taken from the mirror.

Yes, there was no mistaking it. Cuthbert Quain was undoubtedly the man whose name had loomed so largely in the morning papers that day, the man who had so mysteriously vanished. I had not read the report carefully, but decided to do so on my return home. At Covent Garden Station I bought an evening paper. The "clue" was contained in a line or two in the "stop press."

"The Exchange Telegraph Company states it is rumoured that Mr. Cuthbert Quain, who disappeared in London on Monday last, and who has not since been heard of, was seen this morning at Waterloo Station."

"Not much 'clue' in that," I thought. Then I walked on down to Bedford Chambers.

Rosemary and her uncle were to dine with me at my

rooms in Half Moon Street that evening, and I had a box at a theatre that we were to go to afterwards. Directly my business was over I hurried back to Half Moon Street in a taxi. Though I had then only ten minutes in which to dress, such was my curiosity that I spent the first five in carefully reading the account in my morning paper of the disappearance of Cuthbert Quain, and all about him.

I had never heard his name until to-day, yet he appeared to be quite a well-known man, a man of influence—what shopkeepers call “a gentleman of substance.” An intimate friend of the late Sir Alfred Jones, like Sir Alfred he, too, had, through hard work combined with intense energy and determination, risen from obscurity to the high position he then held. “He was a man,” said the newspaper, “with a marvellous capacity for organisation, as great in this respect as Sir Thomas Lipton, Sir Joseph Lyons, Sir Thomas Dewar, and other giants in the world of commerce.” Starting life as a junior clerk in an accountant’s office, he had in a few years risen to be manager. Successful speculation had then enabled him to embark upon business on his own account, and he had become a timber merchant. Successful in this, as in all else, he had then turned his attention to cotton, and, at the present time, was admitted to be one of the biggest cotton brokers in the north of England. Twice he had been elected Mayor of Manchester. Early in life he had married, but his wife had died in giving birth to her first child, and the child had also died, thus leaving him without an heir. “This,” said the newspaper, “was known to have been the great sorrow of his life.”

His age was now fifty-two. Extremely open-handed, and generally popular, though curiously undemonstrative, it had often been said of him that he had not an enemy in the world. Music was his one all-absorbing hobby, mainly instrumental music. The ordinary ballad singer he had, he used to say, “no use for.” Even operatic music appealed to him but little.

His disappearance had been most mysterious. Though he had built just outside Chester a big mansion and furnished it gorgeously, and considered this to be his home, he also owned a house and large estate at Cockington, near Torquay, and, in addition, rented a comfortable flat in Park Mansions, Knightsbridge, where he usually spent a week out of every month, and occasionally a fortnight. It was at this flat he had been staying at the time of his disappearance on the previous Monday.

It was now Friday. After lunching there alone, he had, it seemed, told his butler that a man named Brown would call to see him between five and six that afternoon. The butler was to say that Mr. Quain could not be back and to give him a note. This note, addressed "Mr. J. Brown," Quain had handed to the butler. He had then told the butler to have dinner ready at eight punctually, thus leading him to suppose he intended dining at home. After that he had taken his hat and umbrella and gone out. It was his habit never, in any weather, to wear an overcoat. The butler saw him across the road. It was known that at a quarter past three he had been across to Harrod's, where he bought three small button-hooks—the people at Harrod's knew him by sight. These he paid for, though he had an account at Harrod's.

From that moment onward he had not been seen or heard of. On the Wednesday morning his only near relative, a nephew, who was also his confidential secretary, and who was staying with him at the flat in Park Mansions, informed the police of the strange disappearance. On the Thursday the newspapers got wind of it, and on the following day most of them contained portraits of him, one or two showing him in his mayoral robes of office. Up to seven o'clock on that Friday night, however, the only "clue" obtained consisted of the rumoured report that Cuthbert Quain had been seen on Waterloo platform that morning.

"Ah, my dear Calvert," I exclaimed, as I burst into my little drawing-room, where he and Rosemary had

been awaiting me at least ten minutes, "do forgive my unpunctuality, both of you. I was detained until twenty to seven by a most tiresome person, and have had a fearful rush to get dressed."

"Oh, that's all right," Calvert said, "only we were beginning to think you, too, had disappeared. I suppose," he added, as we passed into the dining-room, "you have heard of this extraordinary disappearance of Cuthbert Quain?"

"Now, to tell you the truth," I answered, "it was partly reading about him that made me so late. I dawdled about upstairs with the paper instead of hurrying to dress."

"Then I forgive you," Calvert said. "I'm deeply interested in the affair, because I knew Quain well."

"You knew him?" I exclaimed. "How interesting! What kind of man was he? I should say is he, as there is no reason to suppose that, because he has disappeared, he is dead."

Calvert paused.

"You ask me 'what kind of man?' " he said at last. "That is a rather difficult question to answer. He was singularly reserved at times, almost taciturn, and occasionally rather pompous—I suppose an ex-Lord Mayor has a right to be pompous. Also, he was an extremely able man. You have, of course, read in the newspapers what he looked like, and have seen his portraits. I should say the papers have rather over-rated his virtues. He was totally devoid of humour. I begin to think, Cyril, there is, after all, some truth in Ian Maclaren's famous dictum that the sense of humour militates against success. So many of the successful men one meets entirely lack humour."

"They have succeeded in spite of, and not because of, their lack of humour in all probability," I answered.

"I think you are mistaken," he said quickly. "Englishmen love a stolid, solemn, wholly matter-of-fact man. They think such a man must necessarily be capable.

They mistake humour for flippancy. That's why we Irish are so much handicapped—I call myself Irish, though my father was English. Our inborn sense of the ridiculous is our curse."

Rosemary here interrupted with an observation to the effect that her uncle was talking nonsense, and that for her part she much preferred a thoroughly amusing man to a thoroughly clever one; a sentiment which I echoed.

"I suppose that is why Cyril appeals to you," her uncle replied pointedly. "Cyril has a sense of humour, but——"

He checked himself, and I added for him :

"No other sense. But that is my misfortune, George." I added, "a misfortune I can't greatly grumble at after what Rosemary has just said."

"I wish you wouldn't call me 'Rosemary,'" she exclaimed quickly. "You know how I hate the name."

"And you know how I hate the name 'Rose,'" I retorted. "Rosemary is a beautiful name. Every little lodging-house servant in London is called 'Rouze.' I shall go on calling you Rosemary—whether you like it or not."

Her uncle seconded me in this, and once more conversation reverted to the disappearance of Cuthbert Quain. From that it drifted to disappearances in general.

"They say twenty thousand people in London alone vanish every year," Calvert said presently, "but of course many turn up again. One of the strangest disappearances of recent years was that young solicitor, Wilfred Jagers. He left his house in St. George's Terrace, Regent's Park, one fine morning, saying he was going for a day's ramble in the country, and from that hour to this he has never been heard of. It was in the month of May, just two years ago. I remember, because I was staying in St. George's Terrace at the time with a friend, and everybody was talking about it."

"Didn't a brother of Grimaldi, the famous clown, disappear in some extraordinary way?" I asked. "I seem to remember some story of the sort."

"Why, yes, his sailor brother," Calvert answered. "He came to the stage-door of the theatre where Grimaldi was appearing, and asked to see Grimaldi for a moment. Then he went away, saying he would return after the performance. He was never seen or heard of again."

"I think one of the most horrible cases," Rosemary remarked, "was Lady Cathcart's, about the middle of the eighteenth century. I came across an account of it in a book I was reading the other day. I suppose you know it."

"No," I said, "I don't. What happened?"

"Oh, it's a long story, but this is the gist of it. Soon after Lady Cathcart had married Colonel Hugh Maguire—he was her fourth husband, you know—she disappeared. Twenty years later when Colonel Maguire died, she was found locked in a room, where he had kept her a prisoner all those years. When she was released she was in a pitiable condition, and had hardly a rag to her back."

"How awful!" Calvert exclaimed. "Maguire must have been mad, of course. Oh, but the most amazing case of all is the historic case of the *Marie Celeste*, when thirteen people all disappeared at once, and were never heard of again."

Rosemary burst into uncontrollable laughter.

"Oh, come, uncle," she exclaimed at last, "we don't want you to cap our stories, you know. I suppose you think we shall believe you because thirteen is an unlucky number!"

Calvert looked hard at her.

"The story of the *Marie Celeste* is quite well known," he said, "and has been vouched for by people even more intelligent than you, Rosemary. The affair happened in December, 1873, and is considered to be the greatest maritime mystery on

record. The *Marie Celeste* was a sailing vessel with a crew of *thirteen*, including the captain and his child, who were also on board. She left Boston for Lisbon, and, two months later, was discovered abandoned with all sails set about three hundred miles from Gibraltar. The captain and crew had evidently left suddenly and recently, because the breakfast was only half eaten. An egg on the captain's plate was partly empty, as though he had risen in the midst of his meal. The crew's breakfast was cooked but not eaten. Everything was in order. The log was written up to within forty hours of the ship being taken in tow. Food in plenty was in the galley and in the hold. The money-chest was intact. There was no sign of a struggle. That the crew left in a hurry was shown by the fact that nothing but the chronometer was missing. No leak existed. All was in order. That story is as true, Rosemary, as that we are all three sitting here."

"And you mean to say not one of the thirteen people who had been on board was ever heard of again?"

"Not one. I heard the story again when I was in Cornwall a month ago. There are plenty of printed records of it."

For some moments we all sat in silence.

"I wonder what was in that note of Quain's that the butler gave to the man called Brown, when Brown called for it," I said suddenly, my thoughts reverting to the latest mystery.

"Oh, but Brown didn't call for it," Calvert exclaimed. "Nobody called for it. Haven't you read the late edition of the evening paper?"

"I have read nothing later than the five o'clock edition."

"Nobody called for it. Somebody rang up Quain's flat at five o'clock, and the butler answered the telephone. A woman spoke. She said that Mr. Brown would be unable to call."

"Did she give any address?"

"Apparently not. Subsequently the police took possession of the note, and opened it."

"And what was inside?"

"According to the evening paper the envelope contained nothing but a very beautifully executed painting on silk of a most curiously coloured gold-fish. There was no letter. No name. Only the picture, evidently hand-painted."

"Of a gold-fish!"

I uttered the words aloud, but quite unthinkingly. This, certainly, was very strange, seeing what I knew. Could this be a clue, a link of any kind? Could there be any connection between——"

I felt in my waistcoat pocket.

"Look at this, Calvert," I said, pulling out Quain's card and pushing it across the table to him. He picked it up and read the name.

"By Jove, Cyril!" he exclaimed excitedly. "Where did you get this, and when? Why! These words in pencil, 'St. James's Park Station, 6.30, Wednesday,' are in Quain's handwriting!"

"Are they really?"

"I am certain of it. I had several letters from him once. He wanted particulars about our place at Clonelly, before we let it. His writing is so peculiar that one can't mistake it. But where did you get this card?"

"I will tell you. This afternoon——"

The sound of the door-bell ringing made me stop. It was followed by three loud knocks.

"Who in the world can that be?" I exclaimed, listening.

We had all stopped speaking. A moment later men's voices became audible. Two men were "parleying" at the door with my servant, Jeans. Presently Jeans entered.

"If you please, sir," he said in his deferential tone "two police officials have called to see you. They say,

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they come from Scotland Yard, sir, and they would like to see you at once."

"Police officials?" I exclaimed. "What do they want to see me about?"

"I asked them, sir, but they wouldn't say. I told them you were at dinner, and they said they would wait until you had finished."

CHAPTER XI.

THE THREE BUTTON-HOOKS.

WHEN I went out of the room I found the two men awaiting me in the small open space I called my "hall."

"You wish to see me?" I asked.

"Am I addressing Mr. Cyril Fane?" asked the elder of the pair.

I told him he was.

"May we see you in private, Mr. Fane?" he asked.

They followed me into my study, where I switched on the lights and then shut the door.

"Sit down," I said. "I hope you won't keep me long, as I am due to go out."

"Not a moment longer than we can help, Mr. Fane, I assure you. I will come to the point at once. It has to do with the strange disappearance of a certain Mr. Cuthbert Quain, that you have no doubt read about in the papers. We understand that you called this afternoon at a house in Castle Street, Endell Street."

"I did," I answered, surprised at their knowledge of my movements.

"And there you saw a lady who calls herself Madame Joubert?"

"Yes."

"You rang the bell of that house at twenty-four minutes to five, you entered the house at eighteen minutes to five, and you came out at twenty-four minutes to six. Isn't that so?"

I laughed.

"Really," I said, "you are better posted in my movements than I am. I don't time myself with a stop-watch when I call upon my friends, but I daresay you are right."

"Then Madame Joubert and Signor Bondi are friends of yours?" he said quickly, without reciprocating my smile.

"They are nothing of the kind," I answered.

"But you spoke of them as 'my friends.'"

• "That was merely figurative."

"I must ask you, Mr. Fane," he said almost sternly, "not to speak figuratively. Are Madame Joubert and Signor Bondi friends of yours, or are they not? I want a plain 'yes' or 'no.'"

Good heavens, the judicial brain! I thought of the conversation I had just had with Calvert on the subject of the sense of humour. Perhaps, after all, he was right. These two solemn, matter-of-fact officials were, no doubt, more or less successful men in their profession, and typical of the men who "get on." They were, at any rate, the last word in stolidity.

"No," I said.

"Yet you must have been acquainted with them as you called to see them."

"I was not. I had never before spoken to either of them. But I knew them both by sight."

"And yet you called upon them."

"Yes."

"Why did you call?"

Why had I called! Why, indeed. Had I known my movements were being watched by a detective—as I now presumed they must have been—and could I have foreseen that my call would be followed by a visit from police officials, and a searching cross-examination, I certainly should not have dreamed of going to that house.

But my cross-questioner was awaiting my reply. I could feel his gaze upon me. My hesitation was arousing his suspicion. All police-officials are suspicious, for suspicion is the breath of the nostrils. Why had I

called? I had not the remotest idea. "Out of curiosity," was the only answer I could think of, and that would be a ridiculous reason to give, one which such men certainly would not believe. I should not myself believe a man if he had told me he had called to see a perfect stranger simply out of curiosity.

"Why did you call on Madame Joubert, Mr. Fane?" the official repeated. I knew from his tone that he now completely mistrusted me.

"I didn't call on Madame Joubert," I said at last. "I called to see Mario Bondi. He couldn't see me at the moment, and the lady sent down word to ask if I would like to see her instead."

"And why did you desire to see Bondi?" was the next question.

This was most embarrassing. I had no idea why I had wanted to see the old man than why I afterwards wanted to see Madame.

"Shall I tell you the plain truth?" I said suddenly.

"That is what we wish to know," he replied coldly.

"Will you believe it if I tell it?"

I felt tempted to call the fellow a stupid ass to his face, but refrained.

"I cannot promise anything," he answered doggedly.

"But I will remind you, Mr. Fane, it is to your own advantage you should not attempt to prevaricate."

"Listen, then," I said, restraining my annoyance.

"I had seen the old man once or twice——"

"Where had you seen him?" he interrupted sharply, "and exactly how often had you seen him? 'Once or twice' is not a definite statement, and we want definite statements only."

"I had seen him twice, once at the Café Royal, and once at a concert at Queen's Hall." I told him the ~~truth~~ facts.

"And Madame Joubert, how often had you seen her?"

"She was with him on each occasion. I have never seen her at any other time." On the first occasion, the

time I saw them together at the Café Royal, I had followed them when they went out, and seen them enter the house in Castle Street."

"You followed them all that way? Why?"

"I'm sure I don't know why," I said in desperation, "any more than I know why I called to see Bondi."

"Really, Mr. Fane," my tiresome inquisitor said, "you can hardly expect us to believe that you followed the man and woman all that way one day, and that to-day you called to see the man for no reason—in other words, simply out of curiosity."

"You may believe it or not," I said, "but that is what I do mean—and that's the truth. I am of a singularly inquisitive nature."

"You must be, Mr. Fane," and for the first time a barely perceptible, grim smile passed over his face.

"But what has all this to do with Cuthbert Quain?" I exclaimed suddenly.

"I'm coming to that now. Cuthbert Quain met Madame Louise Joubert at six-thirty at St. James's Park Station on Wednesday afternoon last—the day before yesterday. At ten minutes past eleven on that morning we had been informed of his disappearance. The last thing he was known to have done was to buy three small button-hooks at Harrod's."

"So I have just been told by a friend who has been dining with me here."

"What is his name?"

"Calvert. Mr. George Calvert."

"Is he married?"

"No."

"And now tell me, Mr. Fane," he went on, "how did Mr. Calvert come to know that Mr. Cuthbert Quain bought three small button-hooks at Harrod's?"

"He read it in the late edition of an evening newspaper."

"Oh!"

I chuckled inwardly. I felt I had scored over the official that time.

"And after the button-hook episode," I said, producing a cigarette and lighting it, "what happened?"

"What you mean to say is," he answered, "what happened after Madame Joubert had met Mr. Quain at St. James's Park Station. We don't as yet know what happened to him between the time he bought the button-hooks and the time he was seen at St. James's Park Station."

"What about his being seen to-day at Waterloo Station?" I interrupted.

"That's a false report—newspaper nonsense," he said with a look of the utmost contempt. Most police officials detest newspapers and all that has to do with them. "He was not at Waterloo Station and he was not seen there."

"No," I said meditatively. "If he was not there I suppose he was not seen there. It must have been some one of the same name."

The official looked at me as though wondering if I were quite sane.

"Won't you smoke?" I said suddenly, offering them my cigarettes. They both declined rather stiffly. I believe they thought this was a ruse of mine to subsidise them.

"Well, after the meeting at St. James's Park," I said, "what then?"

"Cuthbert Quain and the lady hailed a taxi, entered it, and drove direct to Club Row."

"Club Row?" I exclaimed. "Where on earth is that?"

"It's a little street in Houndsditch, near Liverpool Street Station."

"They seem partial to railway stations," I said lightly, blowing a cloud of smoke towards the ceiling.

"At Club Row," he continued, ignoring my flippancy, "they alighted at a small shop."

"And bought more button-hooks?"

"No, Mr. Fane, they did not. You seem to consider all this a joking matter. I can assure you it is nothing

of the kind. The shop at which they alighted is a bird and dog fanciers, where other creatures also are sold—cats, rabbits, ferrets, and so on, also live fish. We have ascertained that at this shop, which is largely patronised by persons requiring ornamental fish, Mr. Cuthbert Quain made certain inquiries—a large number of inquiries—about gold-fish. It appears that he wanted to buy a pair of gold-fish of a very rare kind, or possessing certain very rare hues.”

This statement made me suddenly serious.

“Did he succeed in getting them?” I asked after a pause.

“He did not. Without having made any purchase whatever he and the woman re-entered the taxi, and drove to Castle Street. There they dismissed the taxi and entered the house.”

“And then?”

“Ever since then the house has been watched. We believed Mr. Quain to be still in it, and at seven o'clock this evening we called there. Receiving no reply, we forced an entrance, searched every room, but the house was quite empty. The ground floor is untenanted.”

This statement certainly surprised me. When I had tea in the house, little more than an hour before Bondi and Madame Joubert and her daughter had, evidently, quitted it, there had been no sign whatever that they contemplated leaving.

“What was the house like inside?” I asked.

“How do you mean, ‘like inside’?”

“I mean was the furniture and so forth in order, or had any of Signor Bondi’s and Madame Joubert’s belongings been removed?”

“Nothing apparently had been removed. The house looked as though they had just walked out of it, leaving everything as it was, as if they had intended to return.”

“Perhaps they did. You may have broken into a house while the harmless occupants were out for a walk.”

The official made a little gesture of impatience.

"But," I went on, "if the house was being watched, how did they get out unseen?"

"By the back entrance."

"You mean to say you didn't watch the back entrance, too!"

"No, because there isn't one, properly speaking. From the house it is possible to enter the next one, and from that there is a back exit through a cellar into an area in Long Acre. It was not possible to discover this without entering the house."

"But tell me," I exclaimed suddenly, "how does all this concern me? Why have you come to see me? I don't know Cuthbert Quain—never heard his name until to-day, and, as far as I'm aware, I have never set eyes on him."

"You were seen to enter the house in which we believed him to be, and you are known to have remained there three-quarters of an hour. If you do not know Quain personally, you, at any rate, are acquainted with a person who is a friend of his, Mario Bondi."

"Is Bondi a friend of his?"

"Bondi is a friend of Madame's—therefore presumably he is a friend also of Quain's."

"I can't say I follow the logic of your argument," I said. "Because A is a friend of B's, and B is a friend of C's, therefore A is a friend of C's. Is that the way you put two and two together at Scotland Yard—eh?"

"Then I presume there is no further information you can give us respecting Mr. Quain?" the official said stiffly, ignoring my last remark.

"I was not aware," I answered, "that I had given you any information concerning him, though you have certainly entertained me considerably for a quarter of an hour"—I glanced at the little clock upon the mantelpiece—"yes, for exactly seventeen minutes and three quarters, to adopt your precise mode of reckoning, and you have told me much about him that has interested me very much. Ah, while I think of it," I added, as

though the thought had but just occurred to me, "this may perhaps interest you."

As I stopped speaking I once more produced the card I had shown to Calvert, and handed it to the official. No sooner had he read the name upon it than he became if possible even graver than he had been up to now.

"Who gave you this card?" he inquired, looking at me sternly.

"I found it."

"Where?"

"On Madame Joubert's mantelpiece in her sitting-room at Castle Street."

"When?"

"This afternoon—this afternoon at eleven minutes to five o'clock."

He handed the card to his colleague, who also examined it with extreme solemnity, and at last remarked:

"Them written words are in Mr. Cuthbert Quain's own writing. That's the writing as was on the envelope addressed to Mr. Brown."

He paused for a moment or two, a deep furrow in his brow.

"Now I shouldn't be surprised," he said at last. "I shouldn't be a bit surprised, but that was the appointment he wrote, seeing as it was on Wednesday afternoon he went to St. James's Park Station."

"It does seem possible," I said, "especially as the writing is Mr. Quain's."

"We must ask you to let us take this card away, Mr. Fane," the official said, in a tone which implied that he might be compelled to take it by force if I refused to give it up.

"I have given it to you for that purpose," I replied airily.

"And now," I added, rising, "if your cross-examination is quite at an end, I will tell my man to show you out. I hope you will soon discover Mr. Cuthbert Quain. It might be well another time, when you watch the front door of a house for—how many hours was it? I forget—

to ascertain whether there is not also a back door which it might prove advantageous to keep an eye upon. Good evening, gentlemen."

I breathed more freely when the door had shut behind them, not because I felt in the least overawed by their presence—I had not—but because their deadly atmosphere of officialdom, and the wave of mental suffocation their bovine brains had seemed to exhale had passed out with them. Oh! for a little imagination—a little mental elasticity, a little originality of thought and action, a little speeding up of uncommonplace intelligence in officials of that stamp, I almost cried aloud. How such people breathe in a world of art, and music, and light, and colour, and sensation, and human virtues, and human vices. But of course, I reflected, such men don't breathe that atmosphere. They never have occasion to; they don't know it exists. They are machines, nothing more, human yet inhuman automata, puppets with brains controlled by strings pulled by other human automata in immediate authority over them and obtaining higher salaries—automata whose brain-strings are, in turn, pulled by automata a step higher and receiving, in turn, a higher salary still.

"Here, Calvert," I said, as I flung open the door of the dining-room, where he was still seated with Rosemary, "I want a brandy-and-soda—and don't waste the soda! Come and have one with me."

"Great Scott, Cyril!" he exclaimed, "what's amiss with you? What has happened? Nothing serious, I hope?"

"Oh, no, nothing serious," I answered, as the soda "shwushed" into the long tumbler. I emptied half the tumbler's contents at a gulp, then set it down.

"It's only—only that I have been in conversation with a 'very able man.' Oh! he is capable, I'm sure, and keen-sighted, and clear-headed, and indefatigable, and most trustworthy, and all the rest of it; a man who will 'get on,' a man who will 'rise.' He's a man who some day will be promoted to a high position of responsi-

bility and be 'deeply respected,' and who, when he dies, will have a nice fat marble slab pressed down on the top of him with an inscription upon it containing a complete schedule of the manifold admirable qualities he possessed in life—just tribute to an individual who in this world was pronounced to be in every way 'most worthy.' Yes, old chap," I exclaimed, as I made another dive for the tumbler, "what you say is true, what we love in this dear old England of ours are not men of intelligence and intellect as you and I understand those terms, but men with the intelligence of the steam-roller, which accomplishes its task faultlessly, evenly, regularly, day in, day out, week after week, month after month, neither seeing, nor hearing, nor thinking, nor caring, with intellect which is cold, calculating, matter-of-fact, commonplace, utterly devoid of imagination and emotion. Come—let's get to the theatre."

I pressed the bell and Jeans entered.

"Get me a taxi," I said.

And ten minutes later we were seated in a box at His Majesty's Theatre.

CHAPTER XII.

SOME CURIOUS FACTS.

AFTER the play we had supper at the Pall Mall, at a table remote from the crowd.

It was then I took the opportunity of telling Calvert what Bondi had said to me about Gasperini; how he had described him as "a monster"—also as "a criminal." I intentionally told him this in the presence of Rosemary, being anxious to do all I could that might tend to break her of her infatuation for the man.

"Of course," he said when I stopped speaking, "we could quite easily take the waiter to see him, or somehow bring the two face to face, but you say the police official told you that Bondi had left Castle Street, so that now we don't know where he is."

"I expect he will soon turn up again," I answered. "Anyhow, he is likely to let me know where I can find him, as he spoke in deadly earnest when he asked me to bring Michele Murri to him. As yet he doesn't know Murri's name, or anything about him."

"I think the first thing to be done," Calvert said after a pause, "is to find out all we can about this weird old man, Bondi, and also about his companion. The only way that I can see is for you to go to Scotland Yard and make inquiries. Why not ask to see the officials who called this evening?"

"If anybody is going to talk to those men again," I

answered quickly, "it will not be me. I've had enough 'judicial atmosphere' to-night to last me for a long time."

"Then what else do you suggest?"

"Nothing. Let us wait and see what happens."

For a minute we ate our supper in silence. Once or twice I glanced at Rosemary. She appeared to be distraught. Though she had heard our conversation, she had not interposed any observation. For an instant I wondered if we had been wise in talking so freely before her.

Women are so extraordinarily cunning when they wish to be, that the thought struck me she might be storing up our conversation in order to repeat it to Gasperini. She had once told me she had never spoken to him, but that was a fortnight or more ago. Since then she might have met him clandestinely.

I could hardly suppose this amazing infatuation of hers would remain indefinitely. Either it would pass off, and she would forget about him, or it would increase, and she would end by meeting him, if she had not already done so. She could, I knew, be very secretive, and, after all that had happened, her uncle and I were the last people she would tell, supposing she had met Gasperini or were going to meet him.

Suddenly Rosemary looked up.

"I know Signor Bondi and Madame Joubert," she said quite quietly.

"You know them!" Calvert exclaimed. "Then why didn't you tell us? Where have you met them? How long have you known them?"

"I have met them once or twice at a little music club I belong to—The Amphytrion—you have heard me speak of it, though I have never taken you there. It is quite a Bohemian little place, quite unconventional and informal. Only musicians go there, I think."

"And you have spoken to these people?"

"Oh yes. Everybody speaks to everybody at the Amphytrion. Introductions are unknown there. You

know, uncle, how I detest the ordinary social conventionalities, they always seem to me so uncalled for, so petty."

"But you don't go to this place unaccompanied, surely!"

Rosemary gave a delightful little laugh.

"Why of course I do, uncle," she exclaimed. "Whom should I go with?"

"I have heard you speak of the Amphytrion, but I naturally supposed that when you went there you took somebody with you. Dear me! how girls have changed since my time!"

"I expect they are much nicer now than they were in your time," she answered, laughing again.

"But I don't like this, dear, I don't like it at all," he said. "Goodness knows whom you might meet there. You have already met these two most undesirable people."

"Undesirable! Why, I found them very pleasant to talk to."

"Most undesirable people are 'pleasant to talk to'," he answered. "Did you find Bondi, whom Cyril says is such a horrible-looking old man, 'pleasant to talk to'?"

"Well, he isn't the sort of old thing I should like to have about with me always, but his knowledge of music is considerable, and most critical."

"That, of course, at once makes him 'desirable.'"

"Up to a point, yes."

"Did he ever speak to you of Gasperini?"

She paused.

"No, we didn't happen ever to mention his name. But Madame Joubert talked about him once."

"What did she say?"

"I would rather not tell you. You and Cyril are already so biassed against him."

"Then she doesn't like him?"

"She doesn't."

"Tell us more about Mario Bondi and Madame Joubert."

"There isn't much to tell. Madame Joubert asked me once if I knew Cyril, and I said I did."

"Then she doesn't know you are secretly engaged to be married?"

"Oh, no; at least I suppose not. If she had known, she would hardly have asked me if I knew him."

"It doesn't necessarily follow. She might have wanted to find out things about him."

"She did."

"Really?" I cut in. "What things?"

"Several things. It was, when speaking of you, that she mentioned Gasperini. She wanted to know if you knew him well, and how long you had known him, and if you liked him, and what you thought of him."

"Practically the same questions Mario Bondi asked me. It was probably from him she discovered I knew Gasperini. I was with Gasperini, you remember my telling you, when Bondi called to see him—the first time I saw Bondi. What did you say in answer to her questions?"

"I said nothing definite. She didn't get much information, if any. Oh, by the way," she exclaimed suddenly, "this Mr. Cuthbert Quain who has disappeared was at the Amphytrion the last time I was there. I suppose I may as well tell you now, uncle. I didn't tell you before, because I had an idea you didn't like me going to the Amphytrion, though you had never actually said so."

"You certainly ought to have told me so this evening, dear, when we were speaking about him at dinner," Calvert said reprovingly. "What a strange secretive girl you are! Sometimes you are so confiding, at other times you treat me almost as if were a stranger."

"When were you last at the Amphytrion?" he asked. "I mean what day was it you saw Quain there?"

She reflected for a moment.

"Last Friday afternoon," she said, "this day last week."

"Did you speak to him?"

"No. But Madame Joubert spoke to him, and so did Signor Bondi. They were with him most of the evening. In fact, I think he came to the club with them."

"You had better make a note of that, Cyril," Calvert said to me. "It is clear from what Rosemary says that Quain was on terms of intimacy with these two people, and we know that Bondi knows Gasperini. From Bondi's statement to you it seems certain that the old man knows a great deal about Gasperini's past life. It would be interesting if we could find out whether Quain knew Gasperini, and, if so, if he knew him well. All these people are musicians. That, in its way, forms a kind of link."

While he had been speaking I was formulating a theory—a theory which, the more I considered it, the more plausible it seemed.

"I have an idea about all this," I said suddenly addressing Rosemary as well as her uncle. "Shall I tell you what it is?"

"Go ahead," Calvert said. "I never knew such a man as you for ideas and for curious theories."

"This is a theory," I answered, "but it isn't a curious theory. You remember the newspaper said that when the police opened the envelope Quain had left at his flat to be called for—the envelope that was addressed to a 'Mr. Brown,' and that was not called for—the only thing they found inside it was a beautifully hand-painted picture, done on silk, of a gold-fish of peculiar hues."

"Yes."

"I have told you both more than once all about Gasperini's mysterious obsession for gold-fish, and of the wonderful collection of them that he possesses; also of the way they are all set out in a big, strangely-lit room, in curious tanks and in crystal bowls of all sizes."

"We know all that. Well?"

"Quain, after meeting Madame Joubert, went with her in a taxi to a shop in Club Row, where not only dogs, and cats, and squirrels, and rabbits, and other live creatures are sold, but also gold-fish. There he made a number of inquiries about gold-fish, though in the end he didn't buy any. The envelope left at the Park Mansions flat by Quain was addressed to a 'Mr. Brown,' not to something 'Brown, Esq.', therefore the man to whom it was addressed was probably a tradesman. The police officials didn't tell me the name of the man who keeps the shop in Club Row, but if it was Brown—and this we can probably find out at once from the telephone-book—then my theory is that the picture of the gold-fish was executed by Gasperini, that Gasperini gave it to Quain, that Quain was in communication with Brown about a gold-fish of some particular kind which he was going to get for Gasperini, that Brown was to have called for the envelope containing the coloured illustration, that he was either unable to, or for some other reason did not do so, and that, instead, Quain went down to his shop in Houndsditch to inquire about the fish."

Calvert and Rosemary, after carefully considering the matter, agreed with me that this theory seemed sound. They were more impressed still by my conclusions when, upon consulting the telephone-book, we discovered that an animal and some bird-fanciers, named Brown & Co., had a shop at 118, Club Row. Evidently that was the shop that Quain and Madame Joubert had driven to.

I was busy in my office in the City next day when Maynard Drew sent up his name. He rarely came to see me at the office and, concluding that some matters of business had brought him there, I told the clerk to show him up.

No sooner had he entered the room than I noticed a singular change in his face since I had last seen him. He looked pale, harassed, and beneath his eyes were dark marks, as though he had been up all night, or else indulging in dissipation. Knowing him to be not addicted

to dissipation I at once concluded that some misfortune had befallen him. Beyond greeting him, however, I said nothing, waiting for him to speak, for personally I object to being told, 'when I don't feel well, that I am looking terribly ill.' Some people think remarks of that kind denote sympathy, and therefore like them. I don't.

"My dear Fane," he said as soon as the door was shut and we were alone, "I am worried, dreadfully worried. I have come to you because you are the only man in whom I feel I can confide, and I must confide in somebody. Also I feel you may be able to help me."

"I am sorry to hear that," I exclaimed. "What is the matter?"

In a few words he told me of a most unpleasant experience he had had. While crossing Bond Street on the previous afternoon a stranger had come up to him and, addressing him by name, had asked him whether he knew where the fifty-pound note that he, Drew, had cashed at his tailor's some days before, had been obtained. The stranger, when Drew had asked him who he was, had told him he was a partner in the firm of tailors in Maddox Street, where Drew got his clothes. He said the firm had been upon the point of writing to him with reference to the matter, but happening to see him in the street he had thought it would save time if he spoke to him about it then and there. The reason he wanted to know was because the bank-note had been stopped.

That was bad enough, but worse was to come. About a week before the sum of six hundred pounds in notes had, it seemed, been paid to Drew by a man with whom he had only recently had dealings, a man he had met only twice before. He had delayed paying these notes into his bank, and this fifty-pound note was one of them. He had cashed it at his tailor's because it was after banking hours, and he had to pay someone that night who had not a bank account. He had now just been to his bank, where he had been told, to his horror, that all his notes, to the value of six hundred pounds, paid to him

by his client, had been stopped nearly three weeks before. It was a fearful blow, he said, because at the time he was hard up, and there were several large sums that he must pay at once.

"I am dreadfully sorry," I exclaimed feelingly. "But who is this man who paid you the six hundred pounds in the first instance?"

"He told me his name was Brown," he said. "Charles Brown. He was staying at the Hotel Cecil. When I inquired at the Cecil last night, they told me he left there a week ago. He left the very day he foisted the notes on to me."

"And he got value from you for them, I suppose?"

"Oh, he did!" he answered, and went on to give particulars.

"Who introduced you to this man Brown," I asked.

"Nobody. I met him quite accidentally some weeks ago at the Amphytrion Club. We became rather friendly, and some days later he asked me to dine with him at the Cecil, which I did. Gradually we came to talk of investments, and so on, and eventually I undertook some business for him. I congratulated myself upon having dropped upon a new client who might prove himself pretty useful."

"It's no use telling you now that you ought to have been more prudent," I said; "but wasn't it rather rash to deal with a man of whom you knew nothing?"

"I don't think so. I often meet people by accident who eventually become clients. I shouldn't have accepted a cheque from him, of course, without first of all making inquiries, but Bank of England notes—I never for an instant suspected. I'm in a terrible hole, old man, and that's a fact."

"Why were the notes stopped?"

"I don't yet know. I soon shall."

Then a thought struck me.

"I suppose it is only a coincidence," I said, "but the envelope left by Cuthbert Quain on the day he disappeared so mysteriously nearly a fortnight

ago, saying it would be called for, was addressed to 'Mr. Brown.' "

" Good heavens ! " Drew exclaimed to my great surprise. " You don't say so, Fane ! I hadn't read that ; I didn't read the reports of Quain's disappearance very carefully. Then that may account—— ! "

He stopped abruptly, turned suddenly deadly pale, and sat back in his chair, rigid, speechless !

CHAPTER XIII.

"THIS IS PRIVATE."

THE whole of musical London stood astounded by the news that Dario Gasperini had, without giving any reason, cancelled all his engagements and gone out of town. Whither he had gone, none knew, nor how soon he would return. Letters would not be forwarded—so said the *Morning Post* in its personal column.

All kinds of reports quickly got about. It was said that he had quarrelled with his agent-manager, a man who earned quite a comfortable income by attending solely to Gasperini's interests; that he had been ordered abroad for his health; that his arm had suddenly become paralysed; that he had become engaged to be married to a Royal Princess; that he had, through some pique, decided to retire from the concert platform.

News-editors instructed their astutest news-gatherers to ferret out the truth, but none succeeded in doing so until four days later—eleven days after the visit of the detectives—when it became known that Gasperini was staying, under the name of Dario Volpi, at a house he had rented for a month on a hill overlooking the quaint old town of Dartmouth. He was not alone. With him, ran the report, were two dark-skinned servants!

Subsequent attempts to interview him and to obtain information as to his reason for leaving London alike proved in vain, for nobody answered the door when the

bell was rung. He appeared to have made up his mind to cut himself entirely off from the world. People who had called at the house had, however, heard his violin within. An inquisitive reporter who, by bribery, had obtained admission to his town house, had been able to state that Gasperini's unique collection of golden carp remained at St. John's Wood. Apparently the only person left in his house in Grove End Road, wrote this journalist, was an Italian boy, who looked after the fish.

No clue had been obtained of Cuthbert Quain's whereabouts. I had not expounded to the police my theory as to the connection I firmly believed to exist between the violinist and the missing man, for I did not see that I was called upon to do so. Therefore I took no personal interest in Quain, beyond being keenly anxious to know what had become of him. Before Gasperini had left London I had called at his house at an hour when he would, I knew, in all probability be out, and had shown to the deaf-mute Nubians a portrait of Quain, cut from a newspaper. By means of signs I had succeeded in making them understand that I wanted to know if they knew him by sight, and if he had ever called upon Gasperini. From gestures they made in reply I had come away convinced that the missing man had been to the house, though how long before and how often, I had been unable to ascertain.

About this time a strange thing happened. Jeans my servant at Half Moon Street, was suddenly taken ill. He had been with me a number of years, during the whole of which time he had never had a day's indisposition, and now the illness which had come upon him puzzled both doctors—so seriously unwell did he seem that, acting upon the advice of my regular medical attendant, I had called in another doctor to obtain his diagnosis. Though they did not like to admit it, both physicians, I saw at once, were mystified. Jeans' attack could not rightly be pronounced to be atrophy, they said, though it possessed some of the symptoms of

atrophy. He had been quite a normal-looking, healthy man, active mentally as well as physically. Within a week from the time he had suddenly been taken ill his body had shrunk so extraordinarily that it now resembled skin and bone—while apparently his brain was becoming slowly paralysed.

There was only one thing left to try, the doctors said at last, and I knew they made the suggestion merely as a forlorn hope. Perhaps the atmosphere of London had for some unexplainable reason suddenly disagreed with him—such cases were on record, though they were very rare. Perhaps, therefore, a change of air might prove beneficial. Why not try the seaside? Why not send him right away to some quiet seaside town in the West of England—Dawlish, Teignmouth, or Torquay? There was a hydro at Torquay, which they could strongly recommend.

Torquay, therefore, was the place eventually decided upon. Curiously enough, almost from the hour the man left London he began to get better. When I told the doctors this, three days after Jeans' arrival at Torquay, I could see they were far more astonished than they would have liked me to know they were. Outwardly they remained calm, and the specialist even had the nerve to tell me—looking me straight in the eyes—that he had "fully expected the change of atmosphere and scene would give the poor fellow a very considerable lift." I longed to hear what they said to each other after I had left them together. I could imagine them looking at each other, each with his tongue in his cheek, mentally congratulating one another upon having hoodwinked me very neatly? Oh! those "specialists!"

In a fortnight's time Jeans had, the doctor at the hydro wrote to me, so far recovered as to be able to go out in a bath-chair. That doctor, too, tried to gull me by indirectly giving me to understand it was chiefly the care Jeans had received at the hydro, though to some extent also the wonderful air of Torquay, which were responsible for the extraordinarily quick improvement in the

patient's health. Yet somehow I felt puzzled—greatly puzzled. It was all too magnetic. Jeans' illness had come on so suddenly, and had proved so mysterious in its nature, that strange thoughts came to me whenever my mind dwelt upon it. I tried to dispel them—tried to persuade myself my imagination played pranks with me—that the man's illness had probably been, in reality, quite an ordinary one, and that the doctors had failed to diagnose the case owing solely to some symptoms being absent which usually were present. •

About three weeks after Jeans had gone to Torquay I happened to enter the room he had occupied in my flat in Half Moon Street, to look for a waistcoat for which I had hunted high and low. The man was as honest as the day, and so, I believed, was the servant I had engaged to take his place temporarily; but it had occurred to me that Jeans might unintentionally have mistaken the waistcoat for one of his own, and so have put it away with his own clothes. All the clothes he had not taken with him to Devonshire had been put away in a drawer with the rest of his belongings, and now I set to work to pull them all out, hoping to find the garment I sought.

However, it was not there, and I was about to call my new man to tell him to put all the things away again, when I happened to notice upon the floor an envelope with a little green phial, which had fallen half out of it. This I picked up, intending to replace the phial in the envelope, when something prompted me to pull it out and look at it.

On it was a label with the single letter " B " written in ink upon it—nothing else.

This struck me as curious, and, having worked out the cork, I held the phial to my nostrils. An odd—a very odd, smell—greeted my nostrils. And yet it was not wholly unfamiliar. I seemed only recently to have smelt that perfume somewhere, for it was not unlike a perfume, a rather pleasant perfume. Again I held the phial to my nose. Where had I smelt that? Ah! I remembered

On the instant it all came back to me. That night at Gasperini's, the first evening I had called to see him, that scent had struck me just as the room and all in it began to fade before me, and I began to grow unconscious. Yes! There was no mistaking it. Pungent perfumes recall sights and scenes most vividly; they bring back to mind with extraordinary vividness people one has met who used such scents. This odour, as I smelt it, now conjured up in my imagination Gasperini's room on that well-remembered night, Gasperini himself towering above me, a giant silhouette; the strange lights in the apartments growing gradually dimmer and more dim; the goldfish swimming slowly and monotonously round and round inside their crystal bowls in never-ending circles; the misty figures of the Nubian mutes moving here and there. That perfume seemed to be the very last thing I had been conscious of on that mysterious night.

Now I noticed that inside the envelope—which was pearl-grey, without writing upon it—was a scrap of paper. This I pulled out, thinking some prescription might be written upon it. It was a half-page of notepaper of the same hue, and upon it was written, not a prescription, but the following words in a very neat, feminine hand:

"Take seven drops, *not more*, in a wineglassful of water every night before you go to bed."

There was no name, address or date, nor were there any initials. But on the paper was also written, "This is private." Three words underlined.

Jeans and I had been on terms of much greater intimacy than servant and master usually are, probably because he was the son of a man who for five-and-twenty years had been my father's butler. Jeans' father had been dead about ten years. Consequently Jeans, whose little failing was that he prided himself unduly upon his excellent health and upon the fact that for seven years he "hadn't never touched a drop o' physic nor yet a

pill," as he had many a time said to me, would, I knew, most certainly have told me had he decided to do anything so daring as to take seven drops of anything—except perhaps whisky—in a tumbler of water, especially night after night. What, then, was the meaning of this phial and the instructions in that undoubtedly feminine handwriting?

I pushed the tiny bottle and the scrap of paper back into their envelope, and then put the lot into my pocket. I called my new man, and told him to put away Jeans' belongings. Back in my study, I thought over my discovery for some minutes, then, my mind made up, I pulled the telephone-receiver off its hook.

"Doctor Jenkins at home?" I inquired when I got through to my medical attendant's house.

"Jenkins speaking. That you, Fane?"

"Yes," I said. "Are you likely to be my way to-day?"

"I am due in Hertford Street at three o'clock," he answered—it was then just two.

"Well," I answered, "I wish you would look in for a moment between, say, three and five. I've found something about Jeans that I think you may like to see."

"Certainly I'll look in. To be candid with you, Fane, now Jeans is so much better, that illness of his and the cause of it have puzzled me more than I cared to tell you while I was attending him. They constitute a bigger problem than I have ever before had to tackle, and I have solved a few, I can assure you. What is it you have found?"

"A little phial—but come along and see it. We can't discuss it on the telephone!"

He rang off.

About two hours later we were seated together in my study. Jenkins had the phial in his hands, and was sniffing its contents with a look of considerable interest. He had read the directions before uncorking the phial. Now he picked up the scrap of paper and read the words again.

"I know quite well what it is," he said at last, as he re-corked the phial. "What puzzles me is where Jeans got it, also who the individual is who wrote these instructions, and what business she had to have this drug in her possession."

"You also think, then, that the writing is a woman's?"

"Obviously."

"What is in the phial?"

"You wouldn't be any the wiser if I told you," he answered. "But I will tell you this—it is a very peculiar and most deadly poison, though very little known. If Jeans has been taking it according to the instructions written upon that paper, the whole mystery of his illness, and of what caused it, is cleared up. No wonder we were groping in the dark. You will allow me to take the phial and the scrap of paper away with me, I hope?"

"Most certainly. And you will let me hear from you?"

"You may be sure of that."

Two days passed, but I did not hear from Jenkins. Twice I telephoned to his house; he was out on each occasion. Among the letters on my breakfast-table on the third day after he had called to see the phial was one addressed in an unfamiliar handwriting. A glance at the postmark showed me the letter came from Paignton, a little seaside town on the south coast of Devonshire, two miles beyond Torquay. I had been to Paignton long ago, and spent a week there with my friend Benson, a son of the stock-exchange millionaire, at his great rambling house, quaintly named "The Wigwam." I wasn't likely to forget that visit, for while riding over fences in the private riding-school in "The Wigwam," a circus the size of the Albert Hall, which my host used upon occasions to transform into a ballroom, my horse had fallen, pitched me over its head, and strained my wrist badly. I turned the letter over and read upon the flap of it "Ramsgate Hotel, Paignton."

Wondering whom the letter might be from, I tore

open the envelope. The writing was on pearl-grey paper, and then, directly I began to read it, I recognised the writing. It was the same I had seen three days previously on the scrap of pearl-grey paper enclosed with the little phial in the envelope. Quickly I turned over the page to see the signature.

The letter was written and signed by Louise Joubert.

I confess that this discovery gave me a shock. The contents of the letter were most mysterious, and stirred my curiosity considerably.

"Dear Mr. Fane," Madame Joubert wrote, "I feel that I must write to you at once, for I am more anxious than I can tell to see you again. Most serious things are happening—things I cannot explain on paper. And I cannot leave here. To do so might lead to dangerous complications. And yet I must see you. Please write at once, or better telegraph, and say if it is possible for you to come here, if only for one night. I can then explain everything. Poor Gasperini is at Dartmouth, which is further down the coast, and his house is being watched. Do come. It is most vital that you should come—vital for your happiness, your very life may depend upon it.—Yours sincerely, LOUISE JOUBERT."

I read the letter over twice, then folded it and placed it in my breast-pocket. It was not a letter to leave about. Thoughts crowded into my brain, and unconsciously I began to link together incidents and coincidences just as I had done with respect to Gasperini, the goldfish, and Quain's visit to Brown's shop in Club Row, the envelope with the picture of fish in it, on that evening when Calvert, Rosemary and I had had supper at the Pall Mall Restaurant after the theatre.

The incident now uppermost in my mind was my having noticed in Madame Joubert's room in the house in Castle Street a number of strange books: "Taylor on Poisons," "Tanner on Poisons," the mediæval manuscript in Italian, which I had concluded had been used by alchemists of long ago, and so on.

A little thing in itself, no doubt, but an incident

which, in the face of my discovery of the phial containing a rare poison, and the directions with it written in her handwriting, might end by proving of considerable importance, perhaps might even help in unravelling some mystery greater than that of Quain's disappearance, for Quain still remained missing.

I had finished breakfast, and now I restlessly paced my room, as I am in the habit of doing when engrossed in deep reflection. I felt distracted. I tried to think of some excuse for running down to Devonshire, for Madame Joubert wrote apparently in deadly earnest, and I am not one of those people who pooh-pooh all warnings without giving them a second thought. I had neither seen nor heard of Madame or of Mario Bondi since the evening they had abandoned the house in Castle Street so suddenly and so unaccountably after my visit. In the letter she made no mention of Bondi. Was he with her in the West? Should I meet him if I went there?

Though I only mentally uttered that word "when," my doing so revealed to me that I had, unknowingly, already made up my mind to answer the woman's call to me to come to her, excuse or no excuse. An excuse can easily be found for doing anything one really wants. I found one now—a weak one, I admit—but it served.

At Babbacombe, a beautiful spot close to Torquay, there lived an aunt of mine, a dear old lady of the mid-Victorian type, with silver ringlets dressed in the fashion of the early sixties, who still "detested these horrid motor-cars with their nasty smell and dust," and who, when once I had spoken to her of aeroplanes, had assured me quite seriously that "if the Almighty had intended us to fly, He would have given us wings."

It had been on the tip of my tongue, I remembered, to reply that if we argued in that way we must maintain that the Almighty could not mean us to travel by rail, seeing that He had created us without wheels, but just in time I remembered that the old lady was by no means impecunious; that she must, in the ordinary course of

nature, forsake this world for a happier phase before I had quite passed the vigour of my manhood, and that I, being her only nephew—well, all things are possible in what Emerson called this “best of all possible worlds,” and I would not for anything have risked offending her susceptibilities.

Then and there I sat down and wrote to Madame Joubert, telling her that, as I had business to attend to in Torquay sooner or later, I might as well come down, at once and see to it, and thus kill two birds with one stone by coming over to see her. She might have overrated her powers of persuasion and captivation had I let her suspect the truth, which was that—but for her letter—wild mastodons would not have dragged me away from London to such a one-horse place as Torquay—one of the prettiest watering-places in the West of England, but, alas! one of the sleepest.

CHAPTER XIV.

ANOTHER SURPRISE.

BABBACOMBE was bathed in glorious sunshine as I sat with my charming old aunt—charming in spite of her old-fashioned views and her ingenuous soliloquies upon life—on the lawn in front of the "Chalet," gazing out across the vast expanse of azure sea and at the tiny ships away against the skyline.

I have travelled a good deal, and beheld many lovely landscapes, yet at that moment I thought I had never before seen any coast-line quite so delightfully picturesque as that afforded by the red, irregular cliffs stretching away to left and right, for Babbacombe Down, upon which the chalet stood, was fully a hundred feet above the sea, which lapped the beach almost immediately beneath. After all, I reflected, a brief absence from London in the late spring, when one's environments out of town were as gratifying to the senses as those which then surrounded me, was exceedingly enjoyable.

It was nearly eleven o'clock and, though my aunt's remarks were undoubtedly most edifying, I felt that when the time arrived for me to go to meet the steamer due at Babbacombe in exactly half an hour, I should be more than ready to go. I had decided to catch this boat on its way to Paignton, and had telephoned to the Ramsgate Hotel from the Post Office in Babbacombe

village a message to Madame Joubert to the effect that I would call on her at one o'clock. Inadvertently I had asked my aunt if I might telephone from her house, and I shall never forget the expression that had come into her kind old face as she had replied in a shocked tone—

"Good gracious, Cyril! *What* an idea—that you should think I have one of those dreadful new-fangled machines in my chalet. I have never even seen one!"

I murmured something in reply—I forget, what—and presently she went on to talk again about Jeans—she had already told me she had been to see him many times since his arrival at the hydro. It was my intention to call to see him myself that afternoon, after my interview with Madame Joubert. My aunt, I found, was very anxious about him—not about his health, but she was "sorely concerned" about what she termed "his spiritual welfare." Was he a sound Christian? Did he attend divine service regularly every Sunday, and, if so, was it a Church of England place of worship he went to? I found she had herself cross-questioned him closely on these and many similar points, and I gathered from her remarks that Jeans' replies had not been entirely to her satisfaction.

"Your business in Paignton will keep you out to lunch, you say?" she asked as I rose.

"To lunch, yes; but I shall be back for dinner, perhaps even before. There is nothing, I suppose, that I can do for you in Paignton?"

She thanked me, saying there was not. Then suddenly she remembered that there was something I could do. I had noticed the night before, on my arrival, a bird of abnormal size in an immense cage in the hall. Early in the morning its raucous, ear-splitting screams had awakened me with a wild start. For the moment I had imagined that some evil person had forced an entrance to the chalet and was doing my aunt to death in some peculiarly horrible manner.

After breakfast I had approached this bird in its cage, under the chaperonage of my aunt, and, chiefly with a view to enlisting still further the old lady's affection, had opened friendly negotiations with it by offering it a nut. It was a large Brazil nut, of exceptionally tough texture, yet, to my amazement, the creature scrunched it into pieces with a single bite, as though it had been no harder than a scrap of Stilton cheese. Hardly had it done so than, with flapping wings and gaping beak, it had made a determined and wholly unprovoked assault upon my defenceless fingers, accompanying its hostile attack by one of the most piercing, nerve-racking shrieks I have ever heard, or, I trust, ever shall hear.

My aunt, who was beside me, had not even reproved the bird. To my surprise, and somewhat to my mortification, she had laughed quite heartily.

And now, what she wanted me to do for her was to take this, fearsome creature, named Dando, in its immense cage with me to Paignton and there deliver it safely to a bird-doctor who dwelt in the town!

"It is so good of you to do this," she added, when she had explained the mission she wished me to undertake. "And you will take great care of him on the way, won't you? The man is expecting him, and is to keep him a week. Poor Dando has not been at all well lately, so the change, I daresay, will do him good."

It was, indeed, fortunate she told me the bird had not been well, for that gave me a loophole for escape. I explained to my aunt that these small steamers were rather nasty, draughty boats, adding that, though the sun was so warm, there on the lawn, the wind was in the east, and that probably "out at sea" we should find it extremely cold. Would it be advisable, therefore, to risk Dando's catching a chill on the way to see his doctor?

"Indeed, I think you are right, after all, Cyril," she

said a moment later. "Some men would never have thought of that, and I wonder it occurred to you. Thank you very much. No, Dando shall not go in a 'nasty, cold boat,'" she added, turning to the sour-looking bird that had been put out in its cage on a table in the sun. "I'll send him by Jim in the dog-cart this afternoon," she ended.

In less than half an hour I disembarked at Paignton. Punctually at one o'clock I called at the Ramsgate Hotel, where Madame was expecting me, and I was at once shown upstairs.

The private sitting-room was empty when I entered it, but a moment later the door of the adjoining bedroom opened, and Madame Joubert almost rushed in. After carefully closing the door behind her, she pushed an arm-chair towards me, then seated herself on the settee a foot or two away.

Though rather pale, she looked very handsome, even more handsome, I thought, than when I had last seen her. Her hair, I noticed, was dressed quite differently. She wore an exquisitely-cut gown of a cream silk *crêpe de chine*, the skirt of which was draped round her tall figure and bore the true *cachet* of the Rue de la Paix, and the rich folds were caught up in a *chou*, shaped like a huge water-lily, of a wonderful shade of old rose. Under the ethereal net and lace of her bodice the beautiful colour appeared again in effective touches. The whole gown was a harmony—indeed, the entire *tout ensemble* of the woman breathed the clever cosmopolitan, the charming woman of the world.

"So you really have come!" she exclaimed, fixing her great, brown expressive eyes, upon mine, as though to convince herself that she was not mistaken. She looked, I thought, extremely unhappy.

"It seems rather like it," I answered, smiling. Then I became serious.

"Well, what has happened?" I inquired. "Your letter quite alarmed me."

"I intended that it should," she answered. "Have you not heard anything?"

"Anything?" I repeated. "What sort of thing?"

"About Gasperini?"

"I have heard nothing about Gasperini since he left town," I said, "except that he is staying at Dartmouth. I read that he had taken a house there for a short time."

All at once, to my amazement, she hid her face in her hands, and, swaying her body backwards and forwards, began to moan piteously.

"For heaven's sake!" I exclaimed, moved by her distress, and leaning forward, "tell me what is the matter: what has happened, Madame Joubert?"

I'm a fool where women are concerned. Acting upon a sudden impulse I got up out of my chair, sat down beside her on the settee, and put my arm gently about her, at the same time speaking in an earnest whisper in the hope of allaying her obvious misery.

In broken sentences she told me of the terrible change that all at once had come over the man, and that had been the cause of his cancelling all his engagements and leaving London so suddenly. She had discovered the reason, she said, only two days before, when she had succeeded in obtaining an interview with him at the house where he was staying, which overlooked Dartmouth. She had, she added, no friends in London, and, not knowing to whom to turn for sympathy and for advice, she had ended by writing to me, because as she put it, "I somehow appealed to her and she felt that she could trust me."

"But," I said, when at last she paused, "even if this dreadful misfortune—whatever it may be—has befallen Gasperini, I can't see what you meant when you said in your letter that his house was being watched, and that

'most serious things were happening which might lead to many complications.' You said, too, that it was 'vital to my happiness' that I should come at once, and that 'my life might depend upon it.' What is the meaning of it all?"

She looked at me dully for some moments.

"The meaning is," she said slowly at last, "that Gasperini's enemies have at last succeeded in ruining his brilliant career. For years they robbed him of money. Now they have done him a worse, a much worse, injury—they have robbed him of his nerve, and without nerve, he cannot face his public, cannot play except in private!"

"But how have his enemies done this? And who are his enemies?" I asked in astonishment.

"Ah! I cannot explain! You would not understand. You did not know, until now, that I knew Gasperini. And yet I am his wife."

"His wife!"

"Yes, his wife—and yet not his wife, for I no longer live with him. Legally, I am his wife still—but no one knows it. Ah, no one even suspects! I would not for worlds let anyone suspect. I tell you because I feel that I can trust you."

I paused. Few things surprise me, but I admit that what she had said amazed me.

"You have been very frank with me, Madame," I said at last, "so I shall be equally frank with you. Why do you no longer live with him?"

"Ah, you may well ask!" she exclaimed. "I love him still, intensely, passionately, just as I have always done; but I cannot live with him. The thought of all I have seen, of all I know, is too terrible. No, never could I again face such horrors. And yet he attracts me still. Isn't it strange? When he likes, he seems to magnetise me, make me do his bidding in any way he pleases."

She shuddered.

"And about myself?" I asked abruptly. She seemed

intentionally to have evaded all reference to the statements contained in the second half of her letter.

She raised her eyes to mine, and looked hard at me for some moments. What a perfectly beautiful woman she was, I reflected for about the fourth time. And to think she was Gasperini's wife! To think, too! that he could bring himself to terrify, possibly ill-use, such a lovely creature. To think, again, that in spite of it all, he still retained her love. The whole affair seemed to me mysterious, extremely complex—almost uncanny.

Then suddenly the thought came to me—ought I to trust this woman? On the surface, she seemed most friendly and confiding, and yet——

Again I saw her seated in the Café Royal, with Mario Bondi, apparently gloating over the bank-notes that he was counting. Again I saw her in his company at the concert at Queen's Hall, when Gasperini had so mysteriously broken down in his performance. I thought of Bondi's warning me against Gasperini, though apparently occupying the same house as Gasperini's wife. Lastly I thought of the little phial, and the directions in the handwriting of this woman who called herself Louise Joubert, which had been found among Jeans' belongings.

"You have not yet," I repeated, "told me why you warned me my happiness, even my life, might be at stake if I did not come at once to see you."

"Then I will tell you now," she answered. "Listen to me, for we may not be able to meet again like this—alone and unobserved. All that Bondi told you about Gasperini was true in every detail. Gasperini is abnormal—I cannot say more than that; he is not mad, though most people consider him eccentric. Abnormal people are affected in different ways; many scientists have proved that. Gasperini has strange manias. Some affect him at long or short intervals, others control

him at all times. In a sense they are lusts, and one is a lust for cruelty. When, years ago, he was a student of medicine and surgery at Bologna, some of the tortures he inflicted upon living creatures were too terrible. I already knew him in those days—though not at all intimately. The operations he performed were not done by way of experimenting or with a view to increasing his store of knowledge; they were done because his blood-lust overpowered him. To witness the tortures of his wretched victims afforded him intense pleasure. I had been told this by men who knew him well, but I refused to believe them, I suppose, because I already loved him so. But soon after our marriage——”

She put her hand across her eyes as though to shut out some hideous vision.

“Oh, I cannot describe what I saw him do!” she suddenly exclaimed. “I cannot bear even to think of it!”

“But about the danger that threatens me?” I persisted, recalling her thoughts into the channel from which they had drifted.

“Ah, yes!” she said, her expression suddenly changing. “Gasperini has determined to kill you, and to kill you in a dreadful manner. There are others, too, whose death he intends to compass—by means which will not leave a clue that might lead to his being even suspected. He means to—to kill Miss Calvert! He meant to kill your servant, Jeans—who has lately been so ill! He——” and she paused.

“To kill Miss Calvert!” I gasped. “How do you know all this?”

“He has told me so.”

“And has he also told you the—what methods he means to adopt to bring all this about?”

“No. He would not trust me that far.”

Now I knew that she was lying. It was she, it must have been this woman, who had tried to poison Jeans. The handwriting on the scrap of paper with the phial

proved that. Probably she had been influenced by Gasperini to make the attempt, but that was of less consequence.

"You said in your letter that this house was being watched. Is that true?" I asked.

"Yes. A man called twice to see me, but not knowing his name, or what he wanted, I refused to see him. A waiter here tells me the man was hanging about outside in the street all yesterday. He has not seen him there to-day, up to the present."

I hesitated before speaking again, uncertain what to say. Should I tell her of my discovery of the phial, and of the paper with her handwriting upon it, and watch the expression on her countenance? No, I decided that the time to do that had not yet come. Also I deemed it might not be prudent to question her with reference to her leaving the house in Castle Street so suddenly, with Mario Bondi and the pretty girl she had assured me was her daughter, though the child bore no likeness whatever to Gasperini. Before leaving London, I had ascertained that neither she nor Bondi had returned to the house or shown any sign of life. If the police were searching for them, which I doubted, they had certainly failed signally in their attempts to find them.

"Where is Signor Bondi?" I inquired suddenly.

The woman looked up unconcernedly, and let her beautiful eyes rest on mine. Then, without a sign of emotion—

"You will never see Mario Bondi again," she said in an even tone.

"Why?" I exclaimed. "What has happened to him?"

"Come," she said, rising slowly.

I followed her to the door by which she had entered. She opened it, and signed to me to enter. It was a bedroom. Hardly had I entered it when my startled gaze rested upon the form of a shrivelled little old man with snow-white hair and a twisted arm, lying huddled

up upon the bed. He was strangely still. I approached, and bent over him, thinking that he slept.

An instant later I sprang back with a cry.

"Why, good heavens!" I gasped. "He's dead!"

"Yes," she answered, without a trace of emotion, "Mario Bondi is dead."

CHAPTER XV.

DARK DEEDS.

THE story Madame Joubert had told me before I left her hotel was plausible enough, though I believed only part of it.

When she and her child and Bondi had left Castle Street—why they had all abandoned the place so suddenly and for no apparent reason, she did not reveal—she had, she said, lost sight of Bondi. That, on the face of it seemed improbable. Some days later she had decided to go to Paignton, leaving her child with friends in London; she had stayed in Paignton before, it appeared, and liked the place. Some days after her arrival she had been surprised at receiving a visit from Bondi. How he had discovered that she was staying in Paignton, he had refused to tell. After that first visit, he had called almost daily.

On that day, it seemed, he had called to see her shortly after nine o'clock in the morning, complaining that he felt ill. She had wished to send for a doctor, but he had forbidden her. She was always an early riser, she told me, and Bondi had asked if he might lie upon her bed for a little while, as he felt faint. The bed was made, and the room had already been attended to, so she had consented.

She had then gone out to make some purchases. Upon her return, shortly before eleven o'clock, she had

been horrified to find that, during her absence, he had died. Up to the time of my arrival, she said, she had remained in the bedroom with the dead man, and it was partly the effect of this shock, and of the mental strain she had endured, that had caused her to burst into tears when first she had entered to see me. She had not at first intended to tell me of Bondi's death; but, upon my inquiring what had become of him, she had suddenly decided to do so, and to tell me everything that had happened.

Not wishing to be summoned to an inquest, I at once told her to say nothing of my knowledge of the old man's death, but, when I had left the hotel, to call a doctor and tell him exactly what had happened. She ought, of course, as I said to her, to have sent for a doctor directly she found Bondi lying dead in her room. To this, she replied that the discovery had prostrated her so completely that the thought had not occurred to her. I confess I felt in a rather serious plight. The police might make inquiries, when my visit would be revealed.

She did not strike me as a woman likely to be deeply affected, yet I could not tell her so. I therefore expressed my sympathy, and, as I left the hotel, my brain became filled with strange wonderings, even with indefinable fear and suspicion.

While in conversation with Madame Joubert I had felt convinced of her sincerity. Now, when she was absent, and I considered calmly and impartially all that she had said to me, and then went on to reflect upon all that had happened, grave doubts as to her honesty of purpose arose within me. Two points weighed heavily against her. The first was her handwriting upon that scrap of paper I had found with the little phial; the second, her lame story about Bondi's death.

And yet, I reflected, if the story were not true, would she have shown me the body of the old man lying upon the bed?

She could quite well have let me leave the hotel without admitting me to her bedroom. On the other hand,

she might have had some significant motive for taking me into her confidence in this and other matters.

After leaving her I strolled aimlessly about the sea-front for perhaps half an hour, my brain awlirl. The mystery was hourly increasing. Subsequently I lunched at Della's, and it was during the meal that I remembered I meant to call that afternoon at the hydro at Torquay to see Jeans. A train, I found, was due to leave Paignton for Torquay in half an hour. That train I caught.

An attendant at the hydro conducted me to a delightful spot out in the grounds, where I found Jeans lying upon a long deck-chair, propped up with pillows and comfortably tucked up with rugs. He was alone, reading a novel and smoking a long, thin cigar.

The sound of my voice as I approached him from behind made him start.

"Well, Jeans!" I exclaimed cheerily, "you seem to be having an easy time of it here, eh? Better than being harassed at Half Moon Street. How are you now? But there, I needn't ask," I added, as I stared into his face. "You look a different man!"

"Ah! I am, sir; thanks to your kindness in sending me here," he answered, carefully folding down the corner of the page he had been reading, and closing his book. "The attention and consideration of the people here are more than I can tell you, sir. I'm real happy here."

"Miss Fane told you to expect me, I think," I said, and I seated myself beside him in the chair the polite attendant had brought me.

"Yes, sir," he answered quickly. "And Miss Fane has been most kind to me, sir—most kind."

"Look here, Jeans," I said abruptly; "my aunt tells me you never go to church, and she says she has lent you a prayer-book. You must mend your ways in future—you understand."

"Quite, sir."

I thought I detected a slight twinkle in his eyes, but I went on in my gravest manner—

"In future, Jeans, I shall expect you to go to church every Sunday remember."

"Yes, sir—you will expect me to," he replied respectfully.

"And now, Jeans," I said a little later, as I produced a cigarette and lit it, "there's something I have to ask you. The day before yesterday, being unable to find a particular waistcoat of mine, the thought occurred to me that perhaps you had accidentally put it in among your own clothes. I therefore went into your room to hunt for it, and while there I came across, among your belongings, a small green phial, also directions for taking its contents. The liquid, I may as well tell you now, is a very strong and very dangerous poison! What I want to ask you is: Who gave you that phial, or how did it come to be in your possession? I was the more surprised at finding it, because you have often told me that you never take physic of any kind. Now, who gave you that phial, Jeans?"

While I spoke, he had grown more and more uneasy. When I stopped speaking he remained silent.

"Where did you get it?" I repeated, my gaze set upon him.

"Well, sir," he said at last, hesitatingly, "it was given to me."

"By whom?" I asked sharply.

"By a lady, sir."

"Was the lady's name by any chance Madame Joubert?"

"No, sir," he replied quickly.

"Then who was she?" I inquired, carelessly blowing smoke towards the ceiling.

"A young lady—I've known her some time," he answered, evidently perturbed at my curiosity.

"And you first met her—where?"

He was again silent for a moment.

"Well, sir, as you ask, I first met her at a place of amusement—at the Coliseum."

"Did you see her first, or did she first speak to you?"

I asked. "How came she to give you this phial, and why did she give it to you?"

"I'd been suffering from neuralgia, sir," he answered at once. "She told me that she had some stuff that would do it good, and that she'd send me some, which she did. It was that what was in the phial. Did you say it was poison, sir?" he asked with wide-open eyes.

"I did."

For some moments I paused, wondering what next to ask him. It might be imprudent, I reflected, to tell him the contents of the phial had in all probability caused his illness.

"When did you give up taking these seven drops every night?" I said at last.

"On the day I left London—I forgot to take the bottle with me. The lady had told me that if I went on taking seven drops every night until the bottle was empty, I should never suffer again from neuralgia as long as I lived—and I often suffer from it cruel, sir, as you know. She said the stuff would in—'inoc.' me."

"I suppose she said inoculate," I answered. "And you believed her?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Why shouldn't I?"

So that point was cleared up. Some young woman had deliberately attempted to poison my servant. Had she been an agent of Joubert's? I felt sure she must have been. It now remained to discover the reason for wishing to poison him. Once more I saw the shrivelled body of the old man lying huddled up on the woman's bed. Was he, too, one of her victims? And if so, was Gasperini at the bottom of these dastardly acts—or was the woman acting upon her own initiative? If what she had told me were true—or even partly true—then I should believe that Gasperini was implicated. But, after what had happened, how could I accept as truth any statement made by Louise Joubert?

My aunt found me preoccupied at dinner that night, and told me so. I had been in such good spirits at breakfast, she declared, that she feared I must either have

received some bad news, or else have found the business I had told her I had to transact in Paignton unsatisfactory. In the latter supposition I encouraged her. The only thing she said to me that evening that interested me in the least was that Dando had gone to see his doctor. "Thank heaven," I mentally ejaculated, "I have seen the last of that horrible bird!"

The weather at Babbacombe was still so glorious that I could not tear myself away from the chalet, and, as an excuse for staying a little longer, persuaded myself that the change of air was good for me, and that when I did return to town I should be in splendid fettle for work. I also told myself that my aunt liked having me there, and therefore, by remaining, I performed a charitable act. Had I not wished to stay, however, I am afraid I should, no matter how much the old lady might have pressed me to remain, have told myself that I must not "outstay my welcome," and "neglect my work," and then and there have packed my valise and returned to town.

In the *Western Morning News* I read the report of the inquest on Mario Bondi. Madame Joubert had been the principal witness, and the jury had pronounced death to be due to senile decay. There was no hint at suspicion of foul play. Indeed, the jury intimated that they thought it remarkable the old man should have survived so long. The impression they formed from the appearance of the body was that the deceased must have been "quite a hundred."

Two days later I received a letter from George Calvert, the contents of which distressed me considerably. Rosemary, he said, had been suddenly taken ill in a most unaccountable manner. Two doctors in Kensington had been consulted, and both were equally puzzled, equally unable to diagnose her ailment. He went on to describe in detail the symptoms of the malady, and before I had read the letter through it struck me as obvious that Rosemary's symptoms were practically the same as Jeans' had been.

At once Madame Joubert's words, on the day of our conversation at the Gerston Hotel, returned to me. She had told me that Gasperini had designs upon my life, and also upon Rosemary's! Could this illness of my beloved's be the outcome of some fresh devilry of his? I read on to the end of the letter. Calvert concluded by saying that as the air of Torquay had apparently benefited Jeans so extraordinarily, he had decided to take Rosemary there at once. Would I, he ended, secure rooms for them both, and for the nurse, at the best hotel?

Greatly agitated I went out at once to send him a telegram. At the post office the idea occurred to me of telephoning to Paignton to ask if Louise Joubert were still staying at the Gerston.

She was not. She had left on the previous day, the clerk answered. I reflected for a moment. Yes, that was the day the inquest had been held on Mario Bondi. She must have left as soon as that was over. The hotel manager did not know where she had gone, for she had left no address.

A moment later the clerk, after conversation with somebody, spoke again. The lady's luggage, he said, had been labelled to Paddington.

On second thoughts I did not go down into Torquay to secure the rooms, for an idea had just occurred to me. More than once I had spoken to my aunt of the Calverts, and of Rosemary in particular, and several times she had expressed a wish that she could make their acquaintance. Here was an opportunity. At the chalet there were several spare bedrooms, large, airy rooms facing south, from each of which a lovely view of the bay and the coast-line could be obtained. What could be better for an invalid? It was just lunch-time when I got back to the chalet, and at table I took the opportunity of showing my aunt Calvert's letter.

As I expected, her first thought was for Rosemary. In what way could she be of use to the ailing girl? I had intended asking my aunt outright if she would be

willing to invite the Calverts to come to her, under the circumstances, but she forestalled me.

"Why not," she exclaimed, as soon as she had read the letter, "ask them to come here? I should be delighted to place at their disposal as many of the unoccupied rooms as they might want, and I think I could make them as comfortable here as they would be at an hotel. Certainly they would be much quieter here."

"Indeed they would, my dear aunt," I answered. And so it was arranged.

I was greatly shocked at Rosemary's appearance when I met her and George Calvert and the nurse at the railway station two days later. She looked pale and thin, and in her pretty eyes was an expression that I had never seen before. What could be the matter with her, I kept wondering. Then, all at once, it dawned upon me that the look in her eyes greatly resembled the strange look I had seen in Jeans' eyes towards the middle of his illness—an odd, far-away, quite unnatural expression, as though the brain were in some way affected. In other respects, too, her condition resembled his. There was the same emaciation; the same nervous twitching of the fingers at intervals; the same blueness about the lips; the same darkness beneath the eyes. What could it all mean? The cause of Jeans' mysterious illness I believed I had discovered. But Rosemary's equally mysterious malady could not, of course, be due to the same cause.

She was so weak that I was allowed to speak to her only at long intervals. Each time I addressed her I noticed that she seemed to wince. Once I touched her, and she shrank from me as though in fear. I had not kissed her since her arrival, and, seeing the effect my presence had upon her, I deemed it advisable to refrain from doing so. Yes, she was mentally as well as physically affected—of that I felt positive. Oh! that the awful illness might soon pass; that all symptoms of it might quickly vanish; that she might be spared to become my wife! Her condition stirred my pity to

its depths, increasing my love for her, if that, indeed, were possible. How could I go on living if she were taken from me? She seemed already to be part of my life—part of myself. There was no sacrifice, no pain or misery, I would not willingly have borne if by doing so I could have ensured her quick recovery.

Three days passed, but her condition remained unchanged. I had gone with Calvert for a stroll on Babba combe beach, which, thus early in the seaside season, was practically deserted, and as usual we talked principally of Rosemary. I had already told him of the same symptoms between Rosemary's illness and Jeans', and had described to him my discovery of the phial, of the paper with Louise Joubert's handwriting upon it, and also told him what Jeans had said when cross-questioned by me. Now he suddenly stopped abruptly in his walk and turned to me.

"An idea has just occurred to me," he said, looking at me oddly. "I wonder, now, it did not strike me before."

"What is it? Tell me!" I exclaimed, for I could see from his expression that he was deeply stirred.

"Only this. Quite recently Rosemary's maid gave notice, and left abruptly. She gave no rational reason for leaving. She had no complaint to make, and she said she had always been quite happy at Hornton Street—she had been with Rosemary nearly a year. All she said was that she wished to better her position. Almost directly afterwards a young woman called, who said that Rosemary's maid had told her the place was vacant, and advised her to try for it. She was a nice-looking, apparently quite respectable girl, and she produced her credentials. Rosemary made inquiries and engaged her two days later. It may of course be only a coincidence, but within a day or two of her entering our service, Rosemary complained of feeling curiously unwell, and that was the beginning of this long, mysterious illness."

"Where is the maid now?" I asked quickly.

" At Hornton Street ; I thought it useless to bring her here, as we have the nurse. Besides, I did not like to encroach unduly on your aunt's unbounded hospitality."

I remained silent for some moments, pondering. It might, as Calvert said, be " only a coincidence." On the other hand my suspicions might be well-grounded.

CHAPTER XVI.

TWO LINES IN THE PAPER.

By the time Rosemary had been a fortnight at Babba-combe she had taken a decided turn for the better. Colour was slowly returning to her thin cheeks; the nervous twitching of her fingers had subsided; and the strange, distressing look I had noticed in her eyes, as though she were affected mentally, had begun to disappear.

The weather remained gloriously fine, ~~which~~ was further conducive to her recovery. For Rosemary, from the time she was quite a child, had been curiously affected by her surroundings, as are so many people of artistic temperament. A spell of wet, gloomy weather had the effect of depressing her spirits to zero. On the other hand, bright sunshine and a blue sky and the sound of birds singing seemed to bring to the surface all that was best in her.

I confess George Calvert's story of how he had recently engaged a new servant, and the circumstances under which he had engaged her, made me feel uneasy. The reason I felt suspicious was that the symptoms of Rosemary's malady had, in every respect, been so strangely identical with Jeans', and equally as mysterious. To suppose that the air of Devonshire had alone been responsible for Jeans' and Rosemary's convalescence, did not occur to me. My theory in each case now was that the patient had been removed outside

some evil sphere—a sphere created by one or more persons of deliberately evil intent. It rested with me to discover who those people were, and I was determined to do so.

I had, of course, already strong suspicions.

My aunt had taken a great fancy to Rosemary, as I had expected she would. George Calvert she liked, too, and one afternoon when I was alone with her, she questioned me closely concerning them both. She wanted to know exactly who they were; where they had come from, and what Rosemary's fortune was. Naturally I knew at once why she had become suddenly so inquisitive, but she had no idea I suspected, and I found it hard not to laugh when at last she remarked—

"Now, Cyril, I am going to say something which I daresay will amaze you, and it is this: Miss Calvert seems to me to be in every way a most eligible girl—she is well-connected, good-looking, and altogether charming, and I gather from you that she is not wholly without means. Why not, Cyril, dear, ask her to become your wife? I don't mean at once, but a little later on, when she is quite herself again? You can all stay here just as long as you like, you know; the longer you stay, the better I shall be pleased."

"My dear aunt!" I exclaimed. "I——"

"Well, and why not?" she interrupted. "I should not be surprised if she were to grow to love you very much. Think it over, my dear boy. There's no hurry, you know. But certainly I should be pleased if this were to come about, very pleased indeed, for I like Rosemary very much."

"It would be useless," I said firmly, "my asking her to marry me."

"But why?" the old lady cried. "Really, I don't see."

"Because," I answered sadly, "I've already asked her."

"You have already asked her! Oh! And so she has refused you?"

"On the contrary, she has accepted me," I exclaimed, suddenly laughing. "We have been engaged since last March—we are only secretly engaged as yet. You are the first person I have told. I think Calvert suspects, but he does not know for certain."

In a sort of excess of emotion, my aunt grasped my hand in both her own. I was not surprised at this, for I knew her to be very fond of me, also I knew that in the years of long ago there had been a deep romance in her own life; exactly what it was, I had never been able to discover. In all the years that followed, however, she had never married, though, if rumour spoke the truth, it was not through lack of suitors.

For a long time after this disclosure I remained conversing with my aunt, discussing the past, the present and the future.

"You know," she said at last, rather sadly, "I cannot live many more years, my boy, so, as you have entrusted me with your secret, I will now whisper one to you in return. In my will I have left you the chalet, and a sum considerably more than sufficient to make you comfortable for life. Now, since you are to marry that charming and beautiful girl I am doubly glad I did this, and I only hope that you will both be very, very happy."

I was about to thank her effusively for her extreme generosity, when the maid entered to say that a lady had called to see me.

"What name?" I asked.

"She wouldn't give her name, sir," the girl answered. "She said she was a friend of yours, and wished to give you a surprise, sir."

My aunt looked at me wonderingly.

"Think what friends you have told you are staying here," she suggested.

"What is she like?" I inquired of the maid.

She gave me a description; and at once I identified my visitor.

"Say I will come down," I said. Then, turning to my aunt, "I know who it is," I said quickly. "Someone I know in town, who sometimes comes to Torquay. She may have read in the visitors' list that I was staying here."

I know my aunt did not read in my eyes the extreme annoyance I felt as I rose and left the room. When I entered the drawing-room downstairs Madame Joubert was standing with her back to me, gazing out of the window at the glorious view!

"Ah!" she exclaimed, as she turned, "I am so glad to have found you; you will, I hope, forgive my having called. You have a few minutes to spare, eh?"

"Only a few," I said rather coldly. "What is it you have come to see me for? How did you find out this address?"

"I've been in town since we met at Paignton," she answered, "and I rang up Mr. Calvert's house in Hornton Street to ask for your address."

"Why, what can have made you think of doing that?" I exclaimed in surprise. "How came you to know I was acquainted with the Calverts?"

"The commissionaire at your chambers in Half Moon Street told me," she answered quietly. "I rang up your number, but, unable to get a reply, I rang up the commissionaire downstairs. He told me you had been out of town some days, but he wouldn't say where you were. He suggested that if I rang up Mr. Calvert's house, and gave my name, the servants might give me your address. This I did, and the maid there gave it to me."

"She had no business to give anybody my address," I said, more to myself than to my visitor. Then I added—

"And now, what have you come to see me for?"

"About Gasperini. Have you seen him since you came here?"

"No, and I don't want to."

A thought flashed upon me.

"You have not told him I am here, I mean in this house?" I went on. I had no reason for supposing that he would come to the chalet, even if he did know I were there. Torquay is a long way from Dartmouth, where Gasperini was said to be. Nevertheless, the woman's question had made me uneasy.

"He is seeking you," she said calmly. "He wished to see you, and when he wishes to do a thing—he does it."

"But what can he want to see me for?"

"I have already once told you to be on your guard against him," she answered. "It is to repeat that warning and to tell you he is now seeking you, that I have come here. He does not know you are here, but he will discover it. He discovers everything he wants to."

"In that case," I said quickly, "he should discover the whereabouts of the man who is still missing—Cuthbert Quain."

"I said 'everything he wants to,'" she replied.

"You mean he does not want to find Quain?"

"Why should he want to? What is Quain to him?"

"And yet," I said, watching her face narrowly, "he knew Quain."

I saw her give an almost imperceptible start. Then she said—

"Did he? I was not aware of that!"

"Not aware of it!" I cried. "Come, come, Madame Joubert, your memory must be at fault! You yourself were intimately acquainted with Cuthbert Quain; yet you say your husband, Gasperini, did not know him!"

She smiled.

"I can assure you," she answered, "that I have plenty of intimate friends whom Gasperini does not know even by name."

"He knew Quain not merely by name," I said quickly. "He was personally acquainted with him. Quain was seen just before his disappearance, entering Gasperini's

house in St. John's Wood. I know this, though probably nobody else does. I found it out from those deaf and dumb natives of his."

Still watching her while I spoke I saw that this last remark of mine had certainly made her uneasy.

"I suppose you know, Madame Joubert," I continued, following up the advantage I had gained, "that when you drove with Quain to Brown's shop in Club Row, where they sell birds, and fish and other creatures, you were followed by a detective."

"Is that so?" she gasped with a forced smile. "How interesting—though why a detective should have followed us I have no idea. But now, regarding Gasperini and what I have come to speak to you about," she went on quickly. "If he should come here, you will remember that I have warned you. I also warn you to avoid him any time there may seem to be a possibility of your meeting. You will not forget that, Mr. Fane, will you?"

"You may depend upon it I shall not," I answered. "And I am greatly obliged to you for telling me this. Are you staying in Devonshire for long?" I added, as she prepared to go.

"I really cannot say, my movements are quite uncertain," she said hurriedly, almost nervously. A minute later she had left the house, and I saw her walking with her graceful French gait down the twisting, gravelled path between the lawns, towards the gate.

I seemed to be living in a tangle—in a maze of mystery. Apart from all that had happened since my visits to Gasperini—including the disappearance of Cuthbert Quain, the puzzling illness of my man, Jeans, and then of Rosemary Calvert—I felt extremely curious regarding the sudden death of Mario Bondi in Louise Joubert's room in the hotel at Paignton.

For my part I felt so certain the old man had met his death through foul play—though at whose hands I

hardly dared to think—that once or twice I had been sorely tempted to inform the coroner at Newton Abbot of my suspicions, and to advance my reasons for them. Then I had reflected that the old man, being dead and buried, I had better take no further heed. Besides, I had no desire for notoriety, and to have given information would, of course, have led to my coming prominently into the limelight.

From the upstairs drawing-room of the chalet a perfect view could be obtained of the bay as far as the eye could reach to right and left. On a table in the window of this room stood a powerful telescope upon a tripod. I had gone up to this room to fetch something some time after Madame Joubert had left, and, noticing several battle-ships moving across the bay, heading apparently for Teignmouth, I trained the glass upon them and focussed it. Then I commenced idly scrutinizing several little boats far out at sea. For the most part their occupants were engaged in fishing. In the stern of one small boat, little bigger than a dinghy a blissful happy couple lay locked in each other's arms. How distressed they would have felt, I reflected, had they suspected that through a telescope they could be seen so easily!

Presently I swung the glass well to the right, pointing it upon another boat some distance out at sea. As I again slowly focussed the lens, the speck showed to be a little motor-boat, moving quickly to the right. Again I screwed the lens, and now the boat stood out distinctly—also its occupants, a man and a woman.

Suddenly I uttered an exclamation. I had recognised the occupants. I looked again. Yes. There was no mistaking them. The man in a yachting cap was sprawling lazily back, with his hand upon the helm. I looked again astounded. At first I could not believe my eyes. Yes. It was Gasperini! Beside him was the beautiful, dark woman who, half an hour before, had been conversing with me downstairs. Scrutinising the couple

more narrowly, I saw that the woman's arms encircled Gasperini's neck, and that her hands were clasped together. So powerful was the glass that I could even discern the expression of passionate affection on Louise Joubert's face as she gazed up into his eyes. Her eyes were fixed upon his in the most extraordinary way—even that I could see clearly. The look in them recalled to my mind the expression in the eyes of some creature which has been fascinated by a serpent and cannot help itself. Gasperini's face I could not see, as his back was turned to me.

So much interested in this idyll was I now, that I kept the glass focussed upon the launch until its occupants were no longer discernible. During all the time I had watched them, neither had moved. At last, as I stood upright, a single word escaped my lips :

“ Hypocrite ! ”

Obviously Louise Joubert must be a hypocrite, and a hypocrite of the very contemptible type. She had come to me masquerading as a friend, with information about a man she professed to go in fear of, yet all the time she was enamoured of that man her husband, as she had assured me Gasperini was—though, after what I had just seen, I could not bring myself to believe that he was actually her husband. Engaged couples, I reflected, lie with arms encircling each other's necks, but married people seldom.

Until that afternoon I had never come upon a married couple mutually so infatuated as to behave in an open boat in the way I had seen Gasperini and Louise Joubert doing. What was the truth ?

I was living in a world of problems.

No Londoner can exist without an evening paper and, since my arrival at Babbacombe, I had acquired the habit of sauntering up into St. Mary Church—a village half a mile or so beyond Babbacombe, now, I believe, incorporated with Torquay—to buy the local evening journal issued daily in Exeter.

It was about time for me to set forth on my evening ramble, and as some minutes later I walked along the down, admiring the coast-line now aglow with the setting sun, I felt far from happy. True, Rosemary was recovering—a thought which raised my spirits to some extent—yet the strange incidents which had occurred during the past weeks kept recurring to me, and somehow seemed to foreshadow impending trouble.

What increased my feeling of apprehension was that I seemed all the time to be groping in the dark. There was nothing I could do, nothing I could say, no step of any kind that I could take that might have helped to ward off any calamity I might even now be blindly approaching. More than once, as I went along, I heartily cursed the day when I had set eyes on Gasperini for the first time—that day I had met him in the train and intentionally entered into conversation with him.

Of what use, however, are vain regrets? They are as futile as remorse, to which they are closely related. Before I had reached the little shop where they sold my paper, I had, to some extent, fought down the feeling of depression that had come upon me. Better at all times be too great an optimist than habitually a pessimist. There are those who say that an optimist lives in a fool's paradise. That may be so, but a fool's paradise is a better place to live in, I should say, than the hell some wise men create for themselves through their chronic and gloomy pessimism.

I opened the paper and glanced down its columns. The Suffragettes had been busy again; Lloyd George had been harassing the Unionists; a West-End gaming house had been raided; a Viscount had married a chorus girl; the big race at Newbury had been won by an outsider at 33 to 1. Nothing in that interested me. I was about to fold up the paper and cram it into my pocket when I noticed a line in the "stop-press," and turned the

page sideways to read it. The next moment I almost dropped the paper.

"A stockbroker named Maynard Drew committed suicide this afternoon at his chambers in Baker Street."

That was what I read !

The brevity and baldness of the announcement seemed to intensify its horror. For some moments I could not speak. Poor Drew !—the very last man in the world I should have believed capable of voluntarily taking his life. Why had he done this ? What could have driven him to do it ? Did they know for certain it was suicide—and not an accident ?

I recalled to mind the last time I had seen him, on the day when he called at my office to tell me of the bank-notes which had been stopped. He had been greatly upset that day, I remembered, and I had been unable to advise him. Surely no man, unless feeble-minded, would end his life because a few hundred pounds had been filched from him—least of all a man of Maynard Drew's type and standing. Drew was anything but feeble-minded ; besides he had a rich father, with whom he was on friendly terms. His father would, I felt sure, have helped him out of any serious financial trouble had he deemed it imperative to do so. Or, had the worst come, Drew could with little difficulty have raised a *post obit* on his father. Therefore the incident of the bank-notes being stopped could have no direct bearing upon the cause of this dreadful tragedy.

Naturally I must not let Rosemary know this, I reflected. Also I must be careful to keep the papers on the following day from her. On my return to the chalet I met Calvert coming out.

"Ah, Cyril," he said, "I was coming along to meet you. This telegram came for you just after you were

gone," and he pulled the orange envelope out of his jacket pocket.

The message was very brief :

" Please come at once, most urgent."

It was signed " Enrico Marco," and had been handed in at a City post-office. Marco, I knew, was head of the firm of stockbrokers in which Drew had been a junior partner.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE BURNT MESSAGE.

"It's deplorable—a most deplorable affair! And think of the discredit it casts upon our firm! It was bad enough introducing a client whose bank-notes were stopped, but this——"

The speaker, Enrico Marco, a naturalised Englishman, was senior partner in the well-known firm of Marco, Skinner, Upton, Jukes and Drew, stockbrokers, of Lothbury—the man at whose house Captain Pettigrew had told me he had heard Gasperini play.

Marco stood upon the hearthrug in his study in his house in Grosvenor Street, his hands tucked under his coat-tails, his brow deeply furrowed. There could be no doubt that Drew's tragic death had upset him considerably. It had upset him because it had temporarily disarranged the routine of his firm.

"I tried to keep it out of the papers," he continued with a marked accent, before I had time to speak, "but I was too late. By the greatest of ill-luck a representative of one of the news agencies chanced to be in our offices when I was rung up on the 'phone and told what Drew had done. This journalist overheard my end of the conversation, and heard me mention Drew's name. At once he discovered Drew's private address, chased off

in a taxi, and on reaching Drew's chambers had the effrontery to say he had been sent there by me! Hearing that, of course Drew's servant admitted him, and the scoundrelly fellow saw everything he wanted, and got all the information he required."

"How did—what caused death?" I asked quickly, disgusted at this pompous person's callousness. He had, since I had entered, not uttered a single word of regret or of sympathy for poor Drew. The one thought which seemed to fill his mercenary mind was the way Drew's untoward act might affect the firm and its reputation.

"What caused death? You mean how did he kill himself?" he said, looking down at me. He was a tall, thick-set man, inclined to stoutness.

"Why, yes, of course," I answered.

"Dear me—now I come to think of it, I never asked! His servant telephoned the news, and said he had sent for a doctor. Oh! I suppose he shot himself. I was so upset, I couldn't think of anything. Later, I remembered that you were a friend of his—he had told me so more than once. With some difficulty I ascertained your whereabouts, and then I wired."

"But why did you wire to me?"

"Because I didn't think of anybody else to whom I could wire. Drew's father is on the Continent, I don't know where, and I don't know any of his other relatives—or if he has any. He was very reserved, as probably you know."

"And you didn't go to his chambers, or send anybody?" I asked rather shocked.

"I? No. What should I go to his chambers for? He's nothing to me—I mean no relation. My firm will send a wreath, of course, and I shall send my own car to represent me."

"Tell me, Mr. Marco," I said—my gorge rose in spite of myself—"how has Drew appeared to be of late—

I mean as regards health? Has he seemed depressed, worried, anxious—anything of that kind?"

A curious smile played for an instant about the man's thin lips.

"Really, Mr. Fane," he replied, in a most patronising tone, "you don't, I think, quite recognise my position. I am senior partner in—the sole head of—the firm of Marco, Skinner, Upton, Jukes and Drew. Drew was the youngest of the junior partners, and a mere cypher; his presence didn't count, or barely counted. It was his privilege to be associated with my firm, and no doubt in years to come he would have considerably bettered his position—in fact, his being associated with my firm was a guarantee for that. You will, I am sure, understand that under the circumstances I did not take special notice as to whether he looked well or ailing, or worried, or anxious, or indeed anything else. I was very greatly annoyed when he introduced to my firm a client whose notes the bank refused to cash, and I told him so pretty plainly. It was an unwarrantable liberty—an unheard-of liberty. I was in two minds about requesting him to resign his partnership—as affairs have turned out, I much regret I didn't. It would have avoided this dreadful unpleasantness which, as I say, reflects upon my firm."

As he uttered for the fifth or sixth time those words, "my firm," his body seemed to swell, as his mind was doing. To talk further to such a man would, I felt, be mere waste of time and words. Therefore, after telling him that I should be glad to do what I could to help to get poor Drew's affairs in order, supposing that none of his relatives or other friends should come forward, I left him.

It took me quite ten minutes to get rid of Enrico Marco's "atmosphere." It seemed to hang about me. What an odious man, was the phrase that framed itself in my brain; what a creature to have as a father, a brother, or, worst of all, as a husband. In spite of his great wealth he was unmarried. Had he, I wondered,

ever had the audacity to insult a woman by asking her to become his wife? Long afterwards I was told that he had tried to marry a peeress, and been rejected, and that from that date onward he had detested women.

Drew's servant was very red about the eyes when he opened the door to me, and my brief expression of sympathy caused fresh tears to trickle down his cheeks.

"Tell me," I said, when I had him in a room alone, and had shut the door, "tell me how it happened?"

"It was the gas, sir, that did it," he answered, after a moment's pause. "He went into his bedroom, locked the door, and turned on the gas without lighting it."

"That might have killed you, too," I said quickly.

"Oh, no, sir, he wouldn't have done no harm to me, he wouldn't—not he! He give me this note before he went into his room, told me to go out for a walk, and not to open the note and read it until I'd been gone an hour."

He handed me the slip of paper in its envelope. It contained but a few lines—a warning not to take a light into the bedroom, or near the bedroom door, as the gas was turned on.

"I come back at once in a taxi, sir," the honest fellow went on, "but it were too late. I broke the door in at once, but he were dead."

And again he started sobbing.

"What relations has he?" I asked, when I had soothed the poor man a little. The contrast between this faithful servant's obvious grief, and the demeanour of the pompous, naturalised foreigner I had just been talking to, struck me forcibly.

"None, sir, so far as I know—except his father, and him, he told me yesterday, is away in Russia, I think he said, sir."

I paused for some moments.

"Can I—can I see the body?" I asked, bracing myself. "Is it still here?"

"Yes, sir, in the bedroom. All is just as I found it—just as he left it, poor gentleman."

To my surprise, I experienced no shock upon seeing the body of my ill-starred friend. Lying back upon the bed, fully dressed and covered by a sheet, all but his face, he looked as if he slept. There was no sign of pain, or even of sorrow, upon his placid countenance. It may have been my fancy, but the lips seemed to me to smile. With a sharp twinge of remorse I remembered the many—they seemed all too many—uncharitable, if not actually unkind, things I had said of him at one time or another; the way I had sometimes spoken of his defects; hinted at his little weaknesses, at his fondness for talking familiarly of "big" people, at his harmless social ambitions—how contemptible it was of me to have drawn attention to them.

A drop of comfort in my cup of bitterness was the recollection that once or twice—that day at the club, for instance, when Pettigrew had called him an "outsider" and a "bounder"—I had stood up for him. Poor Drew! For most suicides I feel nothing but contempt—they are cowards who destroy themselves, through lack of moral courage to face life's troubles that all men must expect, and that all should have the backbone to fight against. Had he suddenly discovered that some hideous disease had overtaken him from which there was no hope of recovery? That might, perhaps, have afforded some excuse, but I felt almost certain that was not the cause. There could, then, be but one other reason. Some terrible mental strain must have temporarily unhinged his mind.

I glanced about the room. The first thing to attract my attention was the grate, which was full of burnt papers.

"What are those ashes?" I asked, turning sharply to his man, who stood near the door, sobbing.

"I don't know, sir; I can't say," he answered, pulling himself together. "They were there when I come in. It must be something that he burnt. The police had a look at it."

I went over and looked at them, then stirred them with the poker. Apparently they had been letters, the ashes were so crisp. I knelt down, and dived into them with my hands, hoping to come upon some scraps that had not been destroyed, something that might give me a clue, no matter how slight, to the true cause of the tragedy. But in vain. Every single letter had been burnt to ashes. Not a fragment of the paper but had been entirely consumed.

Disappointed, I rose and looked about me. There was a dressing-table on one side, and chest of drawers facing it. I pulled out the drawers of the dressing-table. Nothing in them but odds and ends of no interest, the lower drawers only containing clothes. The top drawers I pulled out and placed upon the floor. One contained ties, collars, and similar apparel, while the other was empty.

"He kept letters and papers in that drawer, sir, I know," the man said. "It's most likely out of that drawer he took the papers what he burnt. He always kept that drawer locked."

Almost as he spoke, a sheet of torn paper, which had apparently been jammed in the back of the drawer I had pulled out last, fluttered down. I stooped at once and picked it up. It was part of a letter. Evidently when Drew had taken his papers out to burn them, this letter caught between the drawer and the chest had been torn in half without his noticing it. The other half, it therefore seemed reasonable to suppose, had been burnt up with his other letters.

The writing was neat and well formed. This was the scrap, just as I found it. I read the disjointed words and stood breathless in wonder. What did it mean? Its exact appearance was like this—

There is nothing else. And
you do what I have
the whole story of
happened will at
public and you will
disgraced for me

Think it all
you refuse, and
carefully what
and what refuse
mean to you. Is
who is going to
truth if you do
by any possible
discover it
disclose it, a
never do.

After

I will attain his end
other means if you are
foolish as to persist in
refusal, so there will
be way of escape whatever
side to do. I shall
name place at
time tomorrow,
expect you to
be to give me

from all else,
it will mean
the thing is
a very soon
the secret
will die with
part letter /
and if

Twice I read carefully those unfinished lines. Yes, they might well have some bearing upon the tragedy and its causes, I decided.

I folded the torn paper carefully and put it in my inside breast-pocket. Every corner of the room I searched, but nowhere else was to be found anything that remotely resembled a clue. I even turned out the pockets of some of his clothes. All were empty. His purse, keys, a little pocket-knife, and a small octagonal microscope I recollected he once showed me were ranged neatly side by side upon his dressing-table, beside his razors and his hair-brushes.

And close by, were three small button-hooks.

These button-hooks suddenly riveted my attention. They were made of shining brass, which button-hooks usually are not. The sight of them recalled something to my memory. The police official who had called to see me at my chambers some weeks previously had told me the button-hooks bought by Quain just before his disappearance were not ordinary button-hooks. They were made of brass!

Another coincidence! Possibly. I picked up the button-hooks and put them in my pocket, remarking to Drew's man as I did so.

"These are of no value. I shall take them as souvenirs of my poor friend."

"Do, sir," the man answered with effusion. "He would have liked you to have them, I am sure," he added with grim, unconscious humour.

A verdict of 'temporary insanity' was returned two days later. Drew's father, who had hurried back from Russia, broken-hearted at the news, myself, and perhaps a dozen others, attended the cremation—for Drew had expressly stated in his will that he wished to be cremated. I noticed also a very large car, with a crest prominently displayed, with chauffeur and footman in a singularly showy livery. This car, I ascertained, had been sent out of compliment by its owner, Mr. Enrico Marco.

In the mournful procession a woman walked some way behind the general mourners. She was shrouded in crape, her face completely hidden by the thick veil that covered it and, so far as one could judge, she was young. She had bright hair—real Titian red—and I saw that her hands and feet were exceptionally small. I did not like to approach and ask her her name, and inquiries after she had gone failed to elicit any information. Nobody seemed to know her, or whence she had come.

When the will—made two days before his death—was read, I was surprised to hear that poor Drew had left me several keepsakes—some of no little value. Among the curious bequests he made me was an elaborately-flowered silk Japanese dressing-gown, wadded with cottonwool, which, I had once told him, partly in jest, that I admired, when I had seen him wearing it. A still stranger bequest was the following :

“I also leave and bequeath to my friend, Cyril Fane,” the lawyer read out in his matter-of-fact, professional tone, “my three brass button-hooks, which I beg him, on this, the eve of my death, on no account to lose.”

It gave me quite a shock when this clause was read to realise that the will had been made and witnessed by a man from whom he bought his cigarettes, on the very eve of his death. He had, then, calmly premeditated this horrible act !

How peculiar that I should already have appropriated those button-hooks ! Was this yet another coincidence ? Or was it Destiny tracing out its course in the amazing, wholly inexplicable way it sometimes does ?

Examining the various bequests with a feeling of intense sadness on the evening they were delivered at my chambers in Half Moon Street, I pushed my hand into the pockets of the dark green, flowered, dressing-gown to make sure nothing had been left in them.

Suddenly my fingers touched something small and hard. It felt like a locket. I pulled it out. It was a

small miniature—the miniature of a very pretty girl, oval, not more than two inches across at its widest. The girl into whose blue eyes I now gazed intently as I held the miniature beneath the electric light, was very young indeed, eighteen at the most, I should have said.

Her hair, piled high upon her head, and wonderfully dressed in an ultra-modern style, was a glorious shade of red, the true Titian red now so seldom seen.

For a long time I stood there, staring at that face, and into those eyes. What a sweet face it was, so gentle, so kind, so sympathetic, the eyes, withal, keenly intelligent and full of human feeling.

The miniature had been so excellently executed that I judged it to be a speaking likeness. Who was she? What had she been to my poor, misguided friend? Often he had spoken to me of women he had met, of women he knew intimately and none too wisely—spoken of them flippantly, describing them occasionally with a touch of malice. Never—never had he hinted that he knew anyone like this. Perhaps for that reason my curiosity was the more keenly aroused by the discovery I had made in the pocket of the dressing-gown.

Would Fate—Coincidence—call it what you will—ever bring me face to face with the dream-being whose mute eyes stared into mine from the oval in my hand, I asked myself?

And as I put this question there rose into the vision of my imagination the closely-shrouded, slim figure I had noticed following at a distance that sad procession when all that remained of Maynard Drew had been reduced to ashes

CHAPTER XVIII.

BY THE DEVON SEA.

FOR some weeks I had been neglecting my business, yet all had apparently progressed satisfactorily at the office during my absence.

It is, I suppose, a form of conceit that makes so many of us who are actively engaged in money-earning occupations persuade ourselves that our absence for a week or two, indeed for a few days only, must, figuratively speaking, bring about ruin and disaster. Perhaps, if we only knew it, business would, in many cases, increase in prosperity were we to absent ourselves from the scene of action rather oftener, and thus shift responsibility upon other shoulders—more capable shoulders, sometimes, than our own, be it said.

At the days of long ago a maxim was drilled into all children soon after they had vacated the cradle for the schoolroom. It was to the effect that if you want a thing to be done well, you must do it yourself; while a second hoary axiom rampant at that time told us that the way to succeed in life was to "progress slowly but surely." How antiquated and grotesque such theories seem to us in these go-ahead days, when the way—and the only way—to come to the front is to pile as much work as possible on to the shoulders of other people—provided they are the right people for the

work—and to get all work accomplished with extraordinary rapidity.

After poor Drew's funeral I put in some days in the City, and, the report of my head clerk being eminently satisfactory, I decided to run away again. When I informed him of this, it struck me that he looked gratified, though he would not for worlds have wished me to know he was.

The reason of his satisfaction I knew only too well. He thought me fidgety, troublesome—in short, interfering. Himself a born man of affairs, he much preferred me to allow him to work in his own way.

And I? Well, work in the City never really appealed to me. I had embarked upon it because I was compelled, but I much preferred to let my managing clerk attend to it when I could. So one morning I entered the Torquay express and sped rapidly towards the only girl I had ever truly loved. Daily during my brief stay in London I had received a letter from Calvert, or from my aunt, telling me how Rosemary progressed.

According to the last report, she was now convalescent. Then I thought about her future, and in particular about her immediate future. According to Calvert, the doctor attending her was strongly of opinion that she ought to go for a short sea voyage, then spend a month or so in some mild yet bracing climate. Torquay and Babbacombe were healthy enough places, but the weather there was variable, and could not be depended upon, he said. The doctor had, therefore, suggested that she should embark in England, go all the way by sea to Sicily, and then remain in the beautiful island for a while. Taormina, he said, was a delightful place to stay at. He had been there twice himself, and sent several patients there, all of whom had been pleased with the place and benefited considerably.

Long before the train arrived at Torre, which is the station nearest to Babbacombe, I had made up my mind that this was what she must do. It rested, of course, with Calvert to decide if she should go there,

but I knew that a little persuasion from me, and a little more possibly from my aunt, added to the doctor's advice, would make him settle upon Sicily. Then I thought of myself. How pleasant if I could manage to accompany them!

Of course I could not afford the time; of course it would not do for me to be so long absent from my office, for the business would go to pieces. People would say I was "never to be found"—as I had said of others often enough—and the impression would get about that my business was neglected. Already I had been too long absent from town. "If people don't see you, they forget you." I wondered how many times I had made, myself, that platitudinous remark!

But I wanted to go with Rosemary; I wanted badly to go. I thought the matter over, and before the train reached Exeter I had come to three decisions.

Rosemary and her uncle would go to Sicily. They would go all the way by sea, and I should go with them.

Certainly Rosemary was looking ever so much better than when I had left Babbacombe and hurried to London in accordance with Enrico Marco's telegraphed request. In honour of my return she came down to dinner that night—the first time she had done so since the beginning of her illness. What a merry quartet we formed, and how well I remember it, though occasionally a shadow would come over my thoughts as I pondered upon the sad tragedy that had occurred, and again beheld in my imagination that pale, placid face upon the pillow in the little room, and heard once more the bitter sobs of my dead friend's devoted servant. Would the mystery I felt sure there must be connected with that tragic death ever be solved? Should I ever come face to face with the original of that miniature, I asked myself again.

"You seem very thoughtful," Rosemary said, looking at me across the table during one of these brief intervals when my mind had wandered. "Tell me what you are thinking about?"

"I was only thinking of our plans for Sicily," I said,

a lie rising readily to my lips. "It will all be perfectly delightful, as far as I can see, and I only wish," I ended, addressing my aunt, "that you would come out with us."

"Perfectly delightful." How little I thought, as I carelessly uttered those words, of the strange and far from delightful surprises Fate already had in store for us!

Next day, when I opened my morning paper, one of the first headlines I read was: "News of Cuthbert Quain."

A short paragraph stated that the Scotland Yard authorities now had positive knowledge that Cuthbert Quain—who had disappeared so mysteriously after leaving Harrod's Stores and had not since been heard of—had been seen three days after his disappearance. He had been seen to enter a house in Grove End Road.

That was all, but it was more than enough to send a thrill through me as I read it. The house, of course, must have been where Gasperini lived. I felt greatly excited at the thought that perhaps the theory I had long since formed that Gasperini had himself been directly responsible for Quain's disappearance, might presently prove to be the true one. And the thought of the three brass button-hooks Quain had bought at Harrod's—the last act he was known to have performed—and the three brass button-hooks Drew had bequeathed to me in his will, among other of his belongings, flashed back into my mind.

In the course of a walk down into Torquay that afternoon with Calvert—at that time my greatest friend and principal confidant—I intentionally turned our conversation to a subject which was beginning to interest me owing to certain events that had occurred.

"By the way, George," I said, as I lit a cigarette, "haven't I heard you say that you are an authority upon poisons, and the various ways poisons affect the human system? Didn't you tell me some time ago

that you attended lectures on the subject delivered by Professor somebody?"

"Professor Loughton. Ah, yes, and was disappointed with him—very disappointed! I don't pose as an authority, as you put it, but I am—well, fairly well up in the subject, and it has always interested me. Why do you ask?"

"To tell the truth," I said, "I was thinking of Jeans a moment ago, of his mysterious illness, and of that poison I found; you remember me telling you about it?"

"Quite distinctly. I was sorry you didn't show me the phial before handing it over to your doctor. I should have liked to see the fluid it contained."

"I would have shown it to you," I answered, "but the thought didn't occur to me. This illness of Rosemary's has been the oddest thing, too—so exactly like Jeans', and I was wondering——"

"Wondering what?"

"Oh! nothing that I can exactly describe. But now tell me, George, would there be any way of poisoning a person in such a way that a coroner, or a physician, or even an expert toxicologist, would be quite unable to discover that the victim had met his death by foul means? Is there any sort of poison you could give a man that would kill him, leaving no trace of any kind which might lead the most expert analysts to suspect in the very least the cause of death?"

"Certainly there is," he answered at once. "One or two such poisons have been discovered only in recent years. They are not necessarily poisons that need be swallowed, nor yet poisons that need be injected into the blood. A man may be poisoned by inhalation, for example."

"You mean by inhaling ether, or some such anæsthetic?"

"Ah, those are simple things—back numbers I should call them! Also, when common anæsthetics of that kind are used, or soporifics, they usually leave unmistakable

signs. If a man is suffocated by chloroform, ether, or anything of that kind, the body at once betrays the cause of death."

"Is that so? I'm shockingly ignorant about such matters."

"What makes you ask such queer questions?" Calvert asked after a pause. "Has anybody died whom you suspect of having been poisoned?"

"Suspect" is rather a strong word," I said. "I was thinking at the moment of that old man, Mario Bondi."

"Really? But surely you don't think that he was done to death, do you? Who is there you know who might have poisoned him?"

"You go too fast—jump to conclusions too quickly," I answered. "I don't say, I *think* he was poisoned, nor is there anybody I can say I actually suspect. Nevertheless—well, I asked you out of curiosity."

"You must have some reason for asking," he replied quickly. "Is it Louise Joubert whom you suspect, the woman who was the last person, as far as you know, to see him before he died?"

"You are quite a good thought-reader, George," I said smiling. "But don't say I 'suspect' her. I only——"

"Only a vague suspicion, eh? Well, it's the same thing. Why didn't you say this long ago? Why didn't you communicate your suspicion to the police directly he was dead?"

"How could I? I had nothing definite; no reason to assign for what you persist in calling my suspicion; and not a scrap of evidence of any kind to produce. Besides, it is what has occurred since that has made me—well, wonder."

"All the cleverest poisoners in all ages have been women," he observed thoughtfully. "The worst, by which I mean the people who have poisoned on the most wholesale scale, have been men, but the cleverest

and most cunning poisoners have, as I repeat, been women."

For some moments we continued our walk in silence.

"Are you a believer in thought-transference?" I asked suddenly. "By that, I mean in the will of one person being able to influence the will of another person contrary to the first person's wish?"

"I have always believed that possible, for the simple reason that it has again and again been proved possible. If you had read history deeply, as I have, you would know that in all ages, 'from a period so far back that the memory of man runneth not to the contrary' as the lawyers say, men and women have been influenced to do things that they certainly had no wish to do—influenced against their wills."

"You mean by hypnotism?"

"You can call it hypnotism, but it was not actual hypnotism, though no doubt the mental suggestions were in a sense hypnotic or mesmeric. All mental suggestions must be one or other in a sense, and up to a point."

"I am interested to hear that," I remarked thoughtfully. "When I am with you I feel so terribly ignorant."

"That is because you are ignorant."

"Yes, I suppose so," I said lamely. "But to return to our subject. Gasperini is, I should say, a man of extraordinary will-power, don't you think so?"

"I do," he said. Then, after a pause, he added: "Look here, Cyril—I—I ought to tell you something." And again he hesitated. "Two nights ago I felt restless, and could not sleep, when suddenly I heard Rosemary's voice. Her room faces mine, as you know, and apparently the nurse was dozing. I soon realised that Rosemary was talking in her sleep. Yet she spoke so distinctly that in the stillness of the night I could hear every word. She was talking of Gasperini; she went on talking of him; ah, the poor girl talked of nothing else! And the things she said! My God, I hope she didn't mean them! Apparently she dreamed that she

was listening to this music. Then the dream must suddenly have changed, for she began addressing him by name, calling him Dario, saying she—oh, I can't repeat, even to you, the things she said. She was pouring out her soul to him, addressing him in words of wildest passion. It drove me mad to hear her."

"Why didn't you tell me all this before?" I demanded.

"I nearly did. Then something made me refrain. Ah, no, poor girl; she has not forgotten him, far from it, though when she is awake she seems, as you say, to have done so. Her poor mother's case over again," he added at last. "All we can do is to try to combat it."

"Yes, but how?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"By distracting her mind in every way we can," he said at last. "This trip out to Sicily ought to do her a lot of good—change of atmosphere, change of scene, entirely new surroundings. I am glad you are coming with us, Cyril, very glad indeed. Your help will be invaluable, and I believe we ought to go so far as to prevent her from ever hearing a violin, except, of course, her own. It would be useless to try to get her to give up playing. Her violin is part of herself, now, I verily believe. Oh, these artistic temperaments! What a trial they are to others, as well as to themselves. The artistic temperament should be treated as a malady. Von Bulow said a tenor was 'not a man, but a disease.' I tell you, Cyril, the artistic temperament is a disease. You don't come across artists in the way that I do—I am always meeting them: Rosemary makes me meet them. And the more I see of them, the more strongly I abhor them. Give me the stolid, matter-of-fact, phlegmatic, unemotional temperament. People of such temperament, people without nerves, are the people who enjoy life."

"I don't agree with you a bit," I declared. "I like artistic people, and so do you in your heart of hearts."

Artistic people, and the people of upper Bohemia, who are more or less artistic in some way or other, are the only men and women I personally enjoy associating with. And you, you with your Celtic blood and strong susceptibilities, are trying to convince me that—my dear George, you talk at random."

Thus we continued, arguing, differing one from the other in various views we expressed, agreeing occasionally, sometimes almost disputing, until we found ourselves in the Fleet Street of Torquay which overlooks the lovely harbour.

Calvert left me then, as he had to go to Plymouth. My shopping done, I walked slowly, aimlessly, along the water's edge, up a short, steep slope past what the tradespeople call "The Gentleman's Club," past the well-known Bath Saloons, past the imposing-looking Imperial Hotel, and so gradually out of the town and away into the country.

On and on I walked, making my way by a circuitous route back towards the heights of Babbacombe. Dusk, I noticed, was setting in and I glanced at my watch. Good heavens! It was past eight o'clock, and my aunt dined at eight! Increasing my pace, I took the next turning to the left and strode up the hill. It was a very narrow road, and now I recognised it. The road to the right I had passed before coming to it, was the way to Anstey's Cove. I still had a walk of fully two miles before me.

Soon it was almost dark. Now the lane, as it approached the Downs, where the chalet stood, narrowed considerably. The thickly foliated, overhanging trees made it darker still. I was, I suppose, within a quarter of a mile of the chalet, when, twenty yards ahead of me, I discerned a figure standing motionless like a black statue at one side of the road, dimly outlined in the deep gloom.

A strange feeling of nervousness stole over me as I approached, a feeling that annoyed me, and that I considerably resented. Now I was only ten yards off—

now barely five yards from it. My breath came in short gasps.

I was past it at last, but my mouth was dry, my heart beat loudly, a cold perspiration stood upon my brow.

For in the brief glance I had cast up at the figure as I passed it by I had recognised it instantly.

Gasperini stood there motionless, rigid, staring straight before me. His fixed eyes, as I hurried past, had resembled phosphorescent balls shining in the darkness—malevolent, threatening. They had looked like that, I remembered, when I had gazed at him that night I had so unaccountably lost consciousness in his house, amid those weird surroundings.

And as I walked past he had not moved. Neither had he made any sign of recognition.

What fresh evil was intended?

CHAPTER XIX.

REVEALS A RUSE.

"SURE!"

The tone in which the word was uttered, its employment as an ejaculation, and the timbre of the speaker's voice, informed me at once that he was American—a native of the Northern States.

I was standing on the deck of the steamer *Messina* smoking a cigar, gazing out across the blue Mediterranean to the yellow rocks of Corsica, and unconsciously listening to scraps of conversation, punctuated by explosions of laughter, which floated out through the open door of the smoking-room just behind me.

"Say," the same voice suddenly exclaimed, "don't you think that's so, boys? I guess that gurl was vurry, vurry naughty. Guess she was the greatest thing loose—and she was a Maine gurl, sure!"

A shout of laughter greeted this observation. Not having heard the story the American had apparently been telling, I could only conjecture what it had been about. I had never seen the speaker, as far as I know, yet his manner of speech informed me he was what his countrymen aptly term "very fresh killed."

We had been several days at sea from Plymouth, and up to now the weather had been perfect. Rosemary

loved the sea, and Calvert and I were both what landmen term "good sailors," a ridiculous phrase, when you come to think of it. Rosemary's nurse was no longer with her, but Calvert had insisted upon his niece bringing her maid, the maid she had engaged shortly before her illness, while I had brought Jeans with me. Calvert had mildly reproved me for what he called my "extravagance" in bringing a servant, but, as I pointed out to him, Jeans, too, had been at death's door, therefore the voyage would be bound to do him good. Besides, we had not definitely decided how long we should stay in Sicily, and if Jeans had been left alone in London, without work to do, and therefore kicking his heels, how could I tell what mischief he might not get into? True, he knew that I expected him in future to attend church on Sundays, but if I were not there to see that my expectation was fulfilled——

My train of thought, after the American's ejaculation, was interrupted by seeing Rosemary herself suddenly appear on deck. Leaning upon her uncle's arm, her head almost covered by a pretty motor-veil that was also wound round her neck, she came slowly towards me. She was, as I knew, still very weak, and I was pleasantly surprised to see her out so soon.

"Isn't this glorious?" she exclaimed as I went up to them. "I feel so much better already, Cyril, you've no idea. How soon will lunch be?"

This, indeed, was a favourable sign. Our chief difficulty during her convalescence had been to induce her to eat. And now here she was with an appetite, and clamouring for food!

"I can order some lunch for you at once, dearest, it you want it," I answered, delighted. "What shall I get?"

But upon hearing that lunch would be ready in the saloon in less than half-an-hour, she declared that she would wait.

"Your man Jeans seems to have struck up a great

friendship with Rosemary's maid Theresa," Calvert said presently, when he had tucked Rosemary comfortably into an extra big deck-chair, and propped her up with cushions. "He's been sitting stowed away with her down on the lower deck for well over an hour. She's a remarkably fine-looking girl, I must admit. I only hope they won't become so friendly that they'll forget to do their work."

I laughed.

"If they do, I'll pretty soon bring Jeans back to his senses," I said. "He can philander as much as he likes, provided he attends to his duties. Philandering with women always has been rather a hobby of his—or a failing, if you prefer to call it so."

"A common failing of your sex, I believe," Rosemary observed, looking up at us with shining eyes and smiling lips. "I think his master sets him a rather bad example—or is it a good example?"

It was delightful to see her so much like her old self again. It was the first time since her illness she had adopted this lantering tone, which was so natural to her. My spirits rose.

"That kind of failing is infectious," I said lightly, gazing into her eyes meaningly. "George will contract it if you don't watch him when we get to Sicily, and then there will be a vendetta—or whatever it is they call it. I've always heard that black-eyed Sicilian women are wholly irresistible."

"If they resemble those women in the Sicilian Players who were in London, I should say they were perfectly horrible," Rosemary declared. "I had the shudders all night after seeing them—the thought of the men, too, gave me nightmares for a week."

"You mean in *Feudalism*?"

"Yes, that was the play I saw. When the man strangled that brute who had bullied him so, I screamed, and everybody turned to look at me. Wasn't it awful? Ah, here comes Theresa!"

The young woman who came along the deck was

undoubtedly good-looking—remarkably so. Her appearance, indeed, was entirely out of the common. Of medium height, with a singularly good figure and neat waist, she must, I at once concluded, be of foreign—perhaps of Belgian—extraction. She seemed most solicitous for her young mistress's comfort, and had come, she said, "only to inquire if Miss Calvert had all she needed, or if there was anything she could get her!" Her speech betrayed little trace of foreign accent, however, so that when she had gone I asked Rosemary if she knew to what nationality the girl belonged.

"She comes from Brussels, I think she said," Rosemary answered. "Up to the present she is quite the most satisfactory maid I have ever had, so quiet and self-possessed, besides being attentive and considerate. The maids I had before were all English."

"I'm not surprised at Jeans being attracted by her," I remarked. "I only hope he won't fall head over heels in love with her. He is so terribly susceptible."

"Set him a good example, and he won't," Rosemary observed thoughtfully. "Like master, like man: isn't that the saying?"

A loud chorus of laughter reached us from the smoking-room.

"It's that buck American loosing off stories," Calvert exclaimed. "I never heard such stories, never—and he seems to have no end of them. He's a really funny fellow. I think I'll join them for awhile," he said, preparing to go. "You'll look after Rosemary, Cyril? If it grows at all cold, you'll take her at once into the saloon!"

Ah! what a joy it was to see my beloved looking so much better; to hear once again her pleasant musical voice; to listen once more to her merry talk, and the witticisms which came to her lips so naturally. We had often conversed, of course, while together at the chalet, but not until now had she seemed to be really

her old self again. That suggestion of the doctor's that she should go for a sea-voyage had, indeed, been a good one, but better still had been my idea of accompanying them on the voyage.

And when we got to Sicily, what a glorious time we should have! To think that for several weeks we should be together all day, all day and every day, with no object in life but that of enjoying each other's company and making each other happy. In my whole life I had never, I believe, felt so supremely contented as I did during that brief half-hour.

When, later, I went below, I found Jeans carefully laying out my dinner-clothes. My spirits were so high that I started talking to him at once. After asking how the voyage suited him, if he felt stronger than he had done, and putting other commonplace questions of the same description to him, I remarked carelessly—

"You've struck up a friendship, I see, with Miss Calvert's maid, Jeans—eh?"

He turned rather suddenly, and I was astonished at his expression. He did not look amused, as I had expected him to.

"Yes, sir," was all he said, and he said it quite seriously.

"She's a handsome girl, Jeans," I went on in the same semi-bantering tone. "I hope you'll be careful."

I have already said that, having known Jeans since he was born, and his father having been for years in my father's service at Wyndwood, I treated him with greater familiarity than one usually treats a servant.

"Yes, sir," he said again.

"You don't seem very enthusiastic, Jeans," I persisted. Never before had I known him so taciturn when I spoke to him in the tone I had now adopted.

"I am not, sir," he replied, as he began to fit the links into the cuffs of my evening shirt.

"But why not? Have you already quarrelled?"

"I'm sorry she's come aboard, sir," he said, his face hard and thoughtful.

"Sorry! I should have thought you would be uncommonly pleased to have such a companion!"

"No, sir, I'm not."

"Look here, Jeans," I said, "tell me all about it. What has she said to annoy you?"

The man knit his brows.

"She's done a great deal, sir—or I'm very much mistaken."

"Tell me what—tell me at once!" I said, suddenly serious.

"Do you wish me to, sir?" he asked, looking at me oddly.

"I shouldn't ask you if I didn't."

For some moments Jeans appeared very uneasy. Then he said—

"The woman who is now Miss Calvert's maid, sir, is the same I met on that night at the Coliseum, and who give me the bottle with those drops for my neuralgia—what you afterwards told me was poison."

"Good heavens!" I gasped, staring at him. "You don't mean to say that! Are you quite sure?"

"Oh yes, sir, positive. And she didn't seem a bit surprised at seeing me here."

"This is most remarkable!" I said, my thoughts working quickly. "She brought most excellent references when Miss Calvert engaged her, some weeks ago; and yet you say she's not a maid at all?"

"She may be, sir."

"What has she been telling you, talking to you about?"

"All sorts of things. She's interested in you, very much interested, sir; knows a lot about you, too, apparently. She—well, sir, she wanted, it seemed to me, to find out from me all about your habits, and—so on."

When I had spoken to Jeans about the phial the first

time I had been to see him at the hydro in Torquay, I had intentionally refrained from telling him that both the doctor and I had attributed his illness directly to the taking of those drops. I decided that now it would, under the circumstances, be advisable to inform him of that fact.

"Jeans, you recollect me telling you that the phial I found at Half Moon Street among your things contained poison?" I said.

"I do, indeed, sir."

"And so it was this maid of Miss Calvert's—Theresa, as they call her—who gave you that phial?"

"Yes, sir."

I paused for a moment, then went on:

"Now, what I'm going to tell you, Jeans, may surprise you, but it is true. It was through your taking that drug, and from no other cause, that you became so terribly ill. Your whole illness was due to that, and had you gone on taking the stuff every night until the phial was empty, as you were instructed to do, you would now be dead."

The fellow paled visibly. He seemed awed into silence.

"What do you know about this woman?" I inquired abruptly. "Who is she?"

"I have no idea, sir. I met her at the Coliseum just as—well, just as I might have met any other stranger, and we soon became friends."

"You didn't speak to her about me, I hope, or say anything concerning my private affairs?"

"Not to the best of my recollection. It's not a thing I should be likely to tell anybody, least of all a woman of that description. I know my duty too well, sir, and I trust I mind it."

"Then from whom can she have come to know about me, as you say she does?" I asked.

All kinds of strange thoughts and unpleasant suspicions were crowding into my brain. There was the mystery of Rosemary's illness, the partly-cleared up

mystery of Jeans' illness; the mystery of Drew's suicide; the mystery, as I believed it to be, of Bondi's death, to say nothing of the mystery of Mr. Quain's disappearance. Could they all be in some mysterious way connected? Besides that, there were certain lesser problems unsolved—why had Gasperini left town? Why had Louise Joubert gone to Paignton? What was the true reason of her visiting me at the chalet? Why had Gasperini been waiting in the lane at Babbacombe that night?

It was all a big incomprehensible puzzle—a tangled maze. And now here was this girl, who had deliberately tried to poison Jeans by slow degress, on board, and in the service of Rosemary Calvert, whose life, according to the woman, Joubert, Gasperini was determined to take.

Was there some hidden, horrible plot underlying all these incidents which seemed—upon the surface—to be merely coincidences?

The more I tried to fathom the affair the more deeply involved in problems became my mind. In the end I gave it up. Clearly there was nothing to be done but to patiently await issues. But while awaiting them I should, I was now determined, keep my eyes wide open, and keep this girl, Theresa, well away from Rosemary.

After telling Jeans to exercise control over his tongue, but to tell me at once anything he heard, or of anything he saw, that might in the least arouse his suspicions, I went straight to Calvert, and, finding him alone in his cabin, repeated to him all that my man had just told me.

He looked very serious for a minute or so, and his brow became deeply furrowed.

"I can't make head nor tail of it all," he declared at last. "Can you, Cyril?"

I admitted that, though there certainly seemed to be something mysterious in progress, I had no idea what it might be; in fact, that I was completely

nonplussed in my attempts to come to some plausible solution.

"Jeans is to be trusted, I suppose?" he said suddenly.

"Absolutely!" I answered. "I would trust him just as soon as I would trust myself. If he were not so thoroughly dependable, this girl Theresa—supposing she has some deep-laid plot that she is endeavouring to set in operation—would have influenced him to help her, for he is extraordinarily susceptible to female charms. As it is, he is dead-set against her."

"Ah, we are on a voyage!" Calvert answered. "The sea exercises a curiously romantic spell over many of us; it is to be hoped that its spell won't affect Jeans when it is stimulated by the companionship of an undeniably attractive girl like Theresa. Keep a sharp eye on him, Cyril. Tell him to associate with her as little as possible, and I'll try to watch her closely. It won't do to forbid him to talk to her, as that would at once arouse her suspicions, and we must not do that. It seems to me, Cyril, that we shall need to exercise every art of diplomacy and tact we possess."

He paused, then he went on suddenly:

"The cabin facing Rosemary's is empty. I shall see at once if arrangements can be made for me to be transferred to that cabin. I can invent some plausible reason—say that Rosemary feels nervous when I am not near her, or something of that sort."

Scarcely had we finished dinner when the motion of the boat began to increase perceptibly. I went out on deck, and, almost as I did so, the vessel pitched heavily forward. The night was one of inky blackness. No stars were visible, and when at long intervals the moon appeared fitfully, it served only to show the speed at which the great banks of leaden clouds were chasing one another across the sky.

All at once the steamer lurched to starboard. An instant later a great wave struck her amidships. There was a sound like a dull explosion, and, before I could escape it, a curling cone of water whizzing along the deck had drenched me to the skin. Quickly I hurried towards my cabin, to be met by the good-natured laughter and chaff of the little group of passengers standing near the saloon. One of them, of super-intelligence, asked me if I were wet.

"Oh, no!" I called back to him testily, as I hurried down the companion. "Not a bit wet—only spray—quite dry, I assure you!"

I had been in several storms at sea, including a typhoon off the coast of Japan, but never had I known sea and wind to rise so unexpectedly and so quickly as this. The weather changes quickly in the Mediterranean. Now the boat pitched and rolled as though some giant mill-wheel had churned the ocean from its depths. With great difficulty I slewed along the alley-way, my soaked clothes leaving a stream behind me. Again there came a terrific bump against the side. For an instant the ship seemed to stand still and quiver. Then down, down, down she sank by the bows, accompanied by a gurgling, hissing, swishing sound, as the immense wave she had shipped swept slowly along the decks, then poured in huge cascades over the sides back into the ocean.

Gripping the alley-way rail to steady myself, I heard cries of distress issuing from cabins and from distant parts of the ship. At that instant my attention was diverted by a rising tide of boots and shoes in inextricable confusion rushing towards me along the floor. Hardly had I dodged them as they tore past me when the vessel's stern began to sink, and a moment later back came the black and brown squadron in full retreat, reinforced by recruits, also by a tin bucket, a coffee-pot, and by a small cabin trunk, which had broken loose.

The turmoil and racket were now deafening, yet the storm still rose.

Trunks, boxes, packing-cases—anything and everything detachable and movable—could be heard leaping about the cabins: jugs, basins and other crockery crashing into a thousand fragments which, in turn, were hurled first up against one side, then up against the other, thus adding to the uproar, which, with the banging-like shot-gun reports of unfastened doors, and the squeaking and wheezing of straining timbers as the ship rolled slowly over to port, and then over to starboard, soon became converted into a perfect pandemonium, a very hell of discomfort.

I am accustomed to the sea and its vagaries, yet I felt keenly anxious on Rosemary's account. It took me fully a quarter of an hour to struggle out of my drenched clothes and into a dry suit, and during that time first a water-bottle, and then some equally hard thing, committed each an unprovoked assault upon me—my second assailant hit me so hard and so swiftly that I had not time even to identify it.

I found Rosemary alone in her cabin, terrified. As quickly as I could I reassured her that there was no danger whatever, though in point of fact there was a good deal. Time after time enormous masses of water, many hundreds of tons in weight, hurled themselves against the ship with the sound of an explosion. Time after time, too, came that dreadful sensation of the ship sinking by the bows as a huge wave washed on board, forcing her decks down to the water's edge, then rolling slowly back towards the stern. Several times the cabin port-hole in the ship's side resembled for a few moments a sky-light in the ceiling. Several times the clothes which Rosemary had for safety placed upon the bed, were flung across the cabin at us, and moments elapsed before we could disentangle them.

Thus the storm continued unabated, and all the while I remained beside my beloved, soothing and reassuring her as best I could.

Midnight came. One—two—three o'clock! Oh, those interminable hours! Would the gale never stop howling, or the fearful sea never rest again? How monotonous grew the sound of the straining of the ship's fittings; how interminable seemed the rolling, the pitching and the tossing.

I am not likely to forget that storm, for it lasted two whole days, during which time we were kept below. That we were in imminent danger of foundering during the second night of the fearful gale, I well knew; indeed, I suppose everybody must have been aware of it, except Rosemary, whom I kept in her cabin the whole time, and to whose wants only Calvert and I attended.

Theresa was terribly ill while the storm lasted, illness due, I believe to this day, solely to terror. Jeans went to visit her several times, and upon his return reported progress. Each time she had expressed the utmost solicitude for her mistress, and once she had asked Jeans if he thought Miss Calvert would be willing to try a remedy for sea-sickness—she knew one that was infallible, she said; it consisted of a tasteless powder, and some of these powders she had among her luggage.

"But," Jeans answered, as he told me with a grin, "If your remedy is infallible, how is it that you yourself remain so ill?"

"The efficacy of the powders wears off when you have taken a certain number," he said she had answered at once, adding that she herself had already taken too many.

"If she speaks of that again, Jeans," I said, in a low intense voice, "get some of the powders from her, and bring them to me. I wish you had done so when she made that suggestion. I should like to see this 'remedy for sea-sickness,' and get it analysed. Did

you tell her that Miss Calvert is not suffering from sea-sickness?"

"I did, sir," he answered. "What she said in reply to that was: 'Never mind, my remedy will prevent her feeling sick at any time during the voyage.' I was tempted, sir, to ask her if the remedy for sea-sickness would prove as efficacious as the remedy she gave me for my neuralgia, only you told me to be sure and not let her know that I know the 'cure' she gave me was a poison."

"Yes, and don't forget that order," I said quickly. "If you do, the result may prove disastrous for us all, far more disastrous than you may think possible."

How quickly remembrance of pain, sickness, grief, indeed discomfort of all kinds fades from our memory when the trouble has passed. On the morning after that storm had subsided all of us were in the best of spirits; maybe the feeling of relief created by the sudden cessation of our misery set up a re-action tending to render us unusually hilarious.

"I suppose," Rosemary said as we walked slowly along the deck, gazing out upon the azure surface of the Mediterranean, "I suppose I was quite the biggest coward on board. The reassuring effect your presence had upon me when you came into my cabin in the middle of it all, as calm as though nothing unusual were happening, was extraordinary. You are very brave, Cyril!"

I made light of my so-called bravery, but not too light. A reputation for courage is not easily acquired, and now I had established one it was not my intention to dismiss the matter as though there had been no danger whatever. So I said—

"If I have my share of pluck, dearest, I have not myself to thank for it. Some of us are born craven and chicken-hearted; others are born with common courage. But you are mistaken in thinking you were the biggest coward aboard. I saw much greater cowards, and they

were not women. I came across one young fellow who was literally howling prayers—there is no other way to express it. He was—ah, there's Jeans!" I exclaimed suddenly, as I saw him a little way off making signs that he wished to speak to me. "Wait here, dearest, I'll be back in a moment."

CHAPTER XX.

A MAID AND A MYSTERY.

JEANS looked very serious as I approached. He wished to speak to me privately, he whispered, whereupon I decided the best plan would be for us to stand beside the rail and talk in undertones while staring out across the water.

"I've talked again to Miss Calvert's maid, sir," he said at once, "and she gave me these."

As he spoke he produced some tiny, neatly-folded packets, eight or ten in all, which he handed to me.

"The 'remedy' for sea-sickness," he said laconically. "And here's the instructions," he added, pulling from his waistcoat pocket a screwed-up bit of paper, which he proceeded to flatten out.

Instantly I noticed that the colour of the paper was grey. No sooner had I seen the writing than I recognised it.

The writing was Louise Joubert's.

As before, the directions were brief. One of the powders was to be taken in a little water every night, at bedtime.

"Thank you, Jeans," I said quietly, as I put the little packets and the screw of paper into my own pocket. "I will let you know later the nature of these powders. Anything else to report?"

"Well, sir, the woman can't make out Miss Calvert's

reason for no longer needing her services," he said. "She seems, or pretends to be, quite huffy about it."

"Does she suspect the reason?"

"No, sir, not in the least. At least, I think not."

"Does she suspect you of saying anything?"

"Oh, no, sir! Why should she? We are the best of friends. She wants to give me another phial for my neuralgia!"

"Then by all means get it from her."

"I'm going to, sir. She's promised it to me this afternoon."

"Good. It will all be used as evidence, for I mean to demand her arrest as soon as we reach Naples."

"On what grounds, sir?"

"Attempting to poison you; perhaps also for attempting to poison Miss Calvert. We shall see."

I surmised that it would not be an easy matter to get her arrested in a foreign country, yet I meant to try. At Naples we should land, and transfer to another boat. We should probably stay in Naples a few days. That would be my opportunity. *

Meanwhile, what surprised me greatly was that the writing on this second scrap of paper which the girl had given to Jeans should also be in Louise Joubert's handwriting. I pulled the paper out again and read the written directions. Yes, the scrawl was identically the same, so was the paper.

No sooner had I returned to Rosemary than she began to question me with regard to the maid, and her curious absence. Then she turned to her uncle, who had just joined us.

"How much longer is Theresa going to be ill?" she asked pettishly. "Surely, now the sea is smooth and the weather so perfect, she ought to make an effort to get up!"

Calvert and I exchanged a glance; then he answered:

"To tell you the truth, dear," he said, "Theresa has been very ill indeed. She is now so ill that I have decided to place her in a hospital at Naples, or else in

charge of an English doctor there. She cannot continue the voyage."

Rosemary turned quickly.

"Poor girl!" she exclaimed in a tone of deep sympathy. "How very unfortunate! You should have told me this before. What has been the matter with her?"

Seeing that her uncle was at a loss for a reply, I cut in quickly:

"She was flung out of her bunk during the storm, and—and struck her head violently against the edge of the door, and for twelve hours was unconscious. We didn't dare tell you, we feared the news would distress you so; but now you put the question point-blank I feel we ought to tell you."

Rosemary was genuinely distressed. She had liked Theresa from the first, and thought she had at last found a maid who suited her in every way. As the dreadful falsehoods about the maid's "accident" had rolled off my tongue, Calvert had suddenly raised his glasses and became deeply engrossed in the contemplation of some imaginary vessel he said he saw away against the skyline. I tried to change the subject of conversation, but Rosemary still harped upon it.

Suddenly a voice sounded behind us, and simultaneously we all turned. Theresa, demure, respectful, obviously in perfect health, and even better-looking, I thought, than she had before struck me as being, stood before us.

"I trust you are better, miss," she said in her soft accents, addressing Rosemary. "Is there anything I can do for you, miss?"

Rosemary did not answer. We were all, for the moment, too much taken aback to speak. Rosemary was the first to recover composure.

"Nothing, thank you!" she said unconcernedly. "I am glad you have quite recovered. Were you very bad?"

"Not very, thank you, miss. But, if you please,

miss," she added politely, "I wish to leave when we reach Naples."

"Leave!" Rosemary exclaimed rather coldly. "Of course you can if you wish to, but naturally you will forfeit your month's wages. I should like to know why you are leaving! Are you unhappy?"

"Not in the least, miss," the girl replied quickly. "I wish to better myself, that's all, and I have an offer of a better situation."

She turned and walked away down the deck, evidently pleased with herself.

"My dear uncle," Rosemary said after Theresa had left us, "if you mean that the poor girl has annoyed you or anything of that sort, I think it is shameful of you to be so hard upon her."

"It isn't that at all," Calvert replied. "It's nothing of that kind, I assure you. It is something much, much worse. As I say, I can't explain—yet. Won't you believe me, dear? Won't you trust us **both** when we tell you this?"

But Rosemary no longer heard. She was looking straight before her in a dazed, frightened way. Turning quickly in the direction of her gaze, I saw two figures approaching along the deck, now not ten yards off.

Gasparini and Madame Joubert were our fellow-passengers!

I stood there, scarce believing my own eyes.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MUSIC IN THE NIGHT.

AT once I guessed that Rosemary's maid, Theresa, must have known that Gasperini and the woman Joubert were on board from the beginning ; that, in all probability, she had been in communication with them during the voyage, and that very likely this was all part of some secret plot !

Then I thought of all that had happened before, shuddering as I realised what a near escape Rosemary must have had. It now seemed obvious enough that, when Theresa had applied for the situation as maid to Rosemary, she had been acting under instructions received from the woman Joubert who, whether Gasperini's wife or not, was a very intimate friend.

Neither Gasperini nor his companion had shown the least sign of recognition as they passed us on deck. Where had they been during the whole of the voyage ? Below, no doubt, in their cabins. Theresa, upon being kept away from her mistress, must have grown suspicious and communicated her fears to Joubert, perhaps also to Gasperini ; and this, very likely, had made them alter their tactics. Indeed, it all seemed so clear to me now that I did not trouble to ask myself if I might not be mistaken in my conclusions.

Where were they going? I had often read in the newspapers that Gasperini had a beautiful villa at Sorrento. I had even seen in one newspaper a picture of it: so probably he was returning there. We were now within a few hours of Naples, and I hoped that, upon our arrival there, we should see the last of the odious man and his hypocritical companion, also of Theresa, who, I presumed, had now attached herself to them. Under the circumstances I decided to take no steps to secure the maid's arrest, for I foresaw that the formalities in Italy would be endless, the delay and the expense considerable, and I had, after all, no tangible proofs to produce that she had really tried to poison Jeans.

How glorious the Bay of Naples looked as, in the sunlight, we steamed slowly in! Twice before had I been there, but this was Rosemary's first sight of it and, as we stood leaning against the rail, watching the town grow gradually bigger and bigger, she became quite enthusiastic upon the subject of its beauty and picturesqueness.

We spent some days at Bertolini's, and daily visited places she had read about, and long wished to see. We went to Pompeii, and did the usual tourist trip to Capri and similar spots of interest. Thus the days passed, but since that hour on board the *Messina* we had seen nothing of Louise Joubert, Gasperini, nor yet of Theresa. Even when landing we had not caught sight of them. Had they disembarked, or were they continuing the voyage east? I had tried to get a list of passengers before we left the ship, to see for what port the pair were bound, but had not been able to do so.

Boats leave Naples for Palermo daily, and within a week we had arrived in lovely Sicily. After a few days at the pretty Villa Igiea at Palermo, where the waves lap the hotel garden, we crossed the island, and at last arrived at that curious old monastic hotel in Taormina, the San Domenico, of which we had already heard so

much, and which quite fulfilled our expectations. In its way it was quite unique, with its great solid walls, its massive, mullioned windows, its fragrant courtyard, recolent of orange blossoms and flaming with poinsettias, to say nothing of the gorgeous panorama which lay spread out before us.

Here, too, much was to be seen. We visited Amalfi, Ravello, and other interesting localities. Rosemary became so enamoured of the ruins of the historic Greek theatre that she would have liked to spend hours there, ruminating upon the splendours of the past. The balmy air of southern Italy, and perhaps the complete change of scene, seemed to put fresh life into her. Daily she grew stronger; and daily, too, to me, she grew more beautiful, more lovable. A month of this climate and she would, I felt, enjoy even better health than before her illness.

We had been out the whole day, and I was alone with her one night at the San Domenico, gazing out across the moonlit bay, so strangely like a lake, enjoying the perfect stillness of that truly glorious scene. From a distance the sound of oars dipped gently, with rhythmic measure, into the limpid water, was borne to us from time to time with snatches of tuneful song, occasionally even the waters lapping the boat's sides could be distinctly heard, while at intervals a small, dark object would float slowly into the narrow streak of light which tapered into nothing against the far horizon, then drift back into the darkness, while overhead the stars shone with that singular brilliance peculiar to the south. We must, I suppose, have sat there fully an hour, wrapped in thought, only at extended intervals exchanging some brief remark. How long we might have stayed so I cannot say, had our deep contemplation not been suddenly interrupted.

Where was it? Whence did it come? The music of a violin, exquisitely played, had floated, as it seemed, out of the deadly quietude on to the still air, filling the night with heavenly sound. So gradually had the

music stolen in upon the perfect stillness that it seemed to creep into our senses, soothing them as some soporific might, holding us both spell-bound, so that neither could speak a word.

Motionless we sat there, as though suddenly enchanted. Minute after minute passed, and with every moment my brain became more and more intoxicated. It was as though a great wave of emotion, of deep, mysterious feeling, had surged up out of the unknown, stifling my sensibility, deadening my will. I sat there, to all intents stupefied, completely overpowered. More and more entrancing grew the music; more and more it overwhelmed me; more and more it sank into my very soul. I could no more have moved, now, than I could have spoken; I could no more have exercised my will than I could have turned my thoughts to the ordinary things of life. Absorbed, centred as my faculties were, I lost all count of time. When had I heard that music last? Where had I heard it? Ah, yes!

Thoughts of Gasperini flashed to my senses when at last the music ceased. Until then the music had so enthralled me that I had not stopped to think who it was who made it.

Gasperini! Had Gasperini been the player? It seemed impossible—and yet why impossible? Might not he be there, in Taormina, without our knowing it, just as he had been on board our boat when we had not for a moment suspected it? Who but Gasperini the great artist could have made such music as that we had listened to? Turning, I gazed at Rosemary, seated near, only her profile visible, and that indistinctly. Motionless as a statue, she seemed not to hear when I addressed her. I repeated the question I had put to her—what it was I cannot recall. Apparently she neither heard me, nor was she aware of my presence.

Startled at her silence, her immobility, her complete inanition, I sprang from my seat, approached and bent over her. Her eyes were set, gazing vacantly into space

just as I had seen them on two former occasions. She seemed to have been, all at once, struck blind and dumb. I took her hand in mine. It was icy cold.

"Rosemary! Rosemary!" I exclaimed, distracted. "Look at me, speak to me—ah, for heaven's sake, don't look like that!"

The meaning of my words reached her brain. It may have been the intense earnestness of my tone that forced her to hear the words and comprehend their purport. Slowly she turned her head, and, in the dim light cast by a distant lamp I caught the expression that filled her eyes—the expression as of one who, hearing, yet only dimly understood; the expression of a being whose brain was but half awake, whose mental faculty had been drugged and partly deadened. What had happened? What had thus suddenly come over her? Could it be the music alone that had affected her in this amazing way?

I saw her lips move and, bending lower, listened intently to catch the least syllable they might utter. They moved again, and with something like a shudder I distinctly heard the words:

"Dario! Dario! Ah! Dario!"

I placed my hand upon her white brow, to soothe her fevered brain. The contact made her shiver, and, suddenly raising her arm, she took hold of my hand and angrily flung it off.

Still that strange, fixed, unmeaning gaze was in her eyes. I could have cried aloud with dismay, cried out through sheer despair at the change that had so suddenly come over her. Twice before I had seen her like this, but neither time had her face looked to me so ghastly. Had she succumbed to some extraordinary, unaccountable strain the music had created? Was she suddenly struck down—mentally afflicted?

All at once, I remembered that, on a previous occasion, when she had been thus affected, the unexpected return

of her uncle had caused her suddenly to recover. Might this not happen now? Though averse from leaving her alone in the condition she was in, I felt it to be my duty to call Calvert to come to her.

I soon found him in the hotel, and he hurried back with me. Rosemary was just as I had left her—immobile, lethargic, staring straight before her, apparently seeing nothing, hearing nothing.

"What is it, dear?" he asked gently, placing his hand tenderly upon her head, and smoothing her auburn hair. "Are you not feeling well?"

But still, to my surprise and distress, she made no sign whatever. Even the presence of her uncle did not affect her now; she seemed oblivious to it as she had been and was to mine. Calvert remained by her, speaking to her soothingly, encouragingly. Did she recognise him in the least? Once, and only once, she sighed deeply.

Suddenly, to my horror, the music began afresh. Whence did it come? The player must be near, yet we could not discover where. I saw her give a start. Her whole body quivered. Presently she raised herself slowly in her chair, then leant forward as she had done that afternoon at Queen's Hall when Gasperini had played the Mendelssohn Concerto and held her with his passionate gaze. Could she see him out there in the darkness?

The music, serenely soaring, grew impassioned, enthralling, utterly seductive. Even I felt its influence, its irresistible, compelling power. Even I was alive to the magic of those sounds. I tried to fight against it, to resist it, to break the spell it slowly wove about me, and I succeeded to some extent. But if it attracted me so—the thought flashed through my brain—I, a Philistine in music, I, to whom music had not until recently in the least appealed, I, who scarce knew one note from another and who took pride in being level-headed, unemotional, phlegmatic even—what must the

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effect be on Rosemary, whose artistic temperament could be stirred upon the slightest provocation?



It was approaching. It came nearer—closer still. Clearer and clearer it sounded, its weirdly entrancing effect as it seemed enhanced.

Then it slowly died. Again the spell was broken—broken, that is to say, for Calvert and myself, yet Rosemary sat there still hypnotised, utterly helpless. Quite unconscious now, her eyes were the eyes of death while her pulse had almost stopped and her limbs were rigid.

"A doctor! Send for a doctor!" cried Calvert.

Never before had I seen him so distraught. He seemed, for the first time in his life, to have completely lost his head. Carefully we lifted her, and carried her indoors to her room. Her limbs were rigid, her eyes glassy, her entire appearance that of a woman in a trance.

Half an hour passed before the English doctor came, strangely calm after the volatile, gesticulating, excitable Sicilians to whom we were growing so accustomed. Yet he wasted not a moment.

"To what is this condition due?" he inquired very gravely, after a brief examination of his patient. "It is a most unnatural state."

He listened attentively while Calvert explained in detail all that had just happened.

"Cyril," Calvert said at last, "you had better——" He turned to the doctor.

"I fear I didn't catch your name," he said apologetically.

"Stephen-Chambers."

"You had better tell Doctor Stephen-Chambers of the less severe attacks of this kind that Rosemary has had at least twice before."

I did so, explaining all the circumstances, and what had led up to the attacks. The first had taken place on the morning I had called at Hornton Street after my first visit to Gasperini's house in Grove End Road. I told him the exact date—Friday, May 10th. The second attack, more lasting than the first, had been on the afternoon of Saturday, May 18th, during Gasperini's recital in Queen's Hall. I added that she had appeared to be slightly affected also on the night Gasperini had called at Hornton Street and asked to see her, and she had expressed so ardent a wish to meet him.

"A most interesting case," said the grey-haired man thoughtfully, and again approached the couch on which Rosemary lay still unconscious. He took her pulse, then placed his hand upon her heart, ending by slightly drawing up her eyelid.

She made no sign whatever.

"You know," Stephen-Chambers said calmly, "there is nothing to give rise to the least anxiety. She will sleep off this attack, remembering what happened prior to it up to the very instant she lost consciousness. Insensibility commenced probably when this mysterious violinist—whom you assure me was no other than the great Gasperini—was half-way through the music the second time he played. Clearly, from what you say, his first performance must have unnerved her considerably, paved the way, so to speak, for the actual catalepsy. Her case, though unusual, is by no means unique. Certain highly-strung natures are affected most abnormally by music—some by other sounds. Personally I have never, until now, known anyone to be actually hypnotised into unconsciousness by listening to music, though cases of this occurring are on record. It is most interesting."

"It is most distressing," Calvert said rather im-

patiently. "How soon, in your opinion, will she recover from this attack?"

"Ah, that is difficult to say! It may last an hour or so, or it may last all night. She is bound to be well to-morrow morning, and there should be no after effects. At the same time, Mr. Calvert, I would advise that she does not hear the violin again, and emphatically she should not, under any circumstances, be allowed to meet the player."

"Trust me to see to that," Calvert answered quickly.

"There can be no doubt," Stephen-Chambers said when he and I were in the adjoining room, "that the man controls her mentally. By this time her will is, in all probability, subservient to his. She may or may not be infatuated with him; but his will, acting conjointly with his music, launches what I would call a magnetic stream, the influencing effect of which her artistic, highly-temperamental nature cannot withstand. I have, of course, often heard of Gasperini, and many times I have been told stories of his phenomenally-mesmeric personality—stories the truth of which, I admit, I never fully credited. Are you personally acquainted with Gasperini?"

"I have met him," I said.

"I practised in Bologna some years ago," Stephen-Chambers continued, "soon after Gasperini had left there. As a youth, you know, he studied medicine."

"And had a rather odd reputation, I have been told," I said.

"'Odd' is hardly the right word," he answered, a curious smile playing about his lips. "Among my patients there for some years was a very old man named Bondi, a native of this town. The story, which I know to be true, ran that while in Bologna, Bondi became acquainted with Gasperini—or Volpi, as he was called. Bondi had known Volpi's grandparents and great-grandparents—rather dreadful people, according to all accounts. To cut a long story short, Bondi, who was then a rich man, successfully persuaded Volpi to abandon

the study of medicine in order to cultivate his wonderful gift for music, and himself paid large sums, first to have Volpi thoroughly trained, and then to start him in the musical profession. It was only after all this that Bondi's eyes were suddenly opened to Volpi's true character. Meanwhile, Bondi himself had fallen upon evil times, and chiefly through unwise speculation, became a ruined man. Gradually he drifted from sight. Where he went I have no idea, any more than I have of his present whereabouts. Probably he is dead, for he was very old, even then."

"Mario Bondi, a man with snow-white hair and a twisted arm—ch?" I inquired.

"Ah!" Chambers cried. "So you, too, know him?"

"By sight, yes I spoke to him only once. He died lately at Paignton, in Devonshire."

"Indeed! How strange that you should have met him!"

One thing that Stephen-Chambers mentioned incidentally interested me greatly. He had said that Bondi possessed exceptional knowledge of little-known poisons and of their action upon the human body. Gasperini, too, had been an expert toxicologist. It was largely due to their mutual interest in this study, Chambers told me, that Mario Bondi and Dario Gasperini had first become acquainted.

Suddenly I heard Calvert calling from the room adjoining, where Rosemary lay upon her bed. At once I dashed in.

"Doctor! doctor!" I called out a second later. "Please come—something is happening!"

CHAPTER XXII.

GRIM SHADOWS FALL.

WE all three stood beside the bed. Though gradually recovering from her trance, Rosemary had not yet regained consciousness.

Slowly, painfully as it seemed, she moved her arms a little, then drew her knees up and turned on to her side. She was breathing heavily now, and quite regularly. Some minutes later she very slowly opened her tired eyes.

Ah! What joy it gave me to see that the dull, meaningless look had left them! For, in spite of the doctor's words of reassurance, I had feared that her mind might be permanently affected. Without speaking, she looked hard at all of us, her eyes turning from one to another, evidently puzzled at our being there, and wondering what had happened. Presently she smiled.

"How extraordinary," she said, "that I should awake to find myself on my bed, fully dressed, and you men staring at me! What does this all mean?"

As tactfully as I could I explained that she had fainted, and that we had deemed it advisable to send for Doctor Stephen-Chambers, whom I then introduced to her.

"How like a man!" she exclaimed, smiling again, "so helpless in the smallest crisis! You thought, I suppose, that because I fainted I must be dying!"

Didn't it occur to you to try the usual remedies? How did you bring me round, doctor?" she asked, looking up at him.

"How did I bring you round?" he said awkwardly. "Oh, er—that is—well, you came round, you know, soon after I arrived."

She seemed amused at this. Then, turning to me, she added: "I wasn't flung out of the bunk, was I, Cyril?"

Clearly she was much better, yet, in spite of all, neither Calvert nor I felt happy with regard to her. Each time Gasperini's music affected her more strangely. It was easy for Stephen-Chambers to say we must not let her hear it, and for Calvert to assure him that she should not. Rosemary was a girl of exceptional character. To treat her as a child would, I knew, be out of the question.

Strange that, after hearing about Bondi from Stephen-Chambers, I should so soon hear more about him. Walking down the Corso on the following day, I turned into a shop to buy a cap. The name upon the door seemed familiar, and quickly I remembered that "Ficarra" was the name I had noticed in old Mario Bondi's hat that day at Gasperini's—the day I had first set eyes upon the old man.

"You are Signor Ficarra?" I asked when I had conversed for a minute or so with the polite, voluble, rather obsequious Italian with deep-set eyes, who had come forward to attend to me.

With much gesture he assured me that he was, and that all his services were entirely at my disposal.

"I think I know a customer of yours," I said a little later, as I fitted on a cap before the mirror, "Signor Bondi."

"Ah! *si, signore!*" he exclaimed in very broken English. "For many years Signor Bondi has been a good customer of mine—he wears the same shaped hat always, and says nobody else can make his hats quite as I can. I knew him, too, when he was rich—the

kind signore! Now he is poor, eh, but quite/poor! It is strange you speak of him to-day!"

"Strange? Why?"

"For a long time I had not heard his name. Last week a signora spoke to me of him, and now to-day—you."

"Indeed?" I said interested. Then I added boldly—"Who was the lady?"

• "Ah, signore, I do not know her name; I had never before seen her. She came in here last week—oh, but a fine lady, beautiful, very beautiful!"

"Dark?"

"Yes, signore—very fine lady!"

"With brown eyes, and hair—like that?" I indicated by a gesture what I meant.

"Si, signore!"

"I think I know that lady. She spoke of the old man with the twisted hand, eh?"

"Yes. Madonna mia! Poor man! it was terrible—that sad misfortune."

"Misfortune?"

"Ah, then signore does not know that Signor Bondi's arm suddenly shrivelled up?"

"Shrivelled up! I never heard that."

"By accident, Signor Bondi poisoned his arm. The doctors would have cut it off, but Signor Bondi said 'No.' He did not die, but his arm shrivelled—twisted, as it is now. Ah, but that was years ago!"

I drew Ficarra on to speak about Bondi. He told me of the fortune he had lost, and about his cleverness, mentioning, incidentally, his "vengeful disposition."

"Years ago," he said presently, warming to the subject of Bondi, which evidently interested him, "Signor Bondi was much interested in some curious deaths which took place. One occurred here, at the Hotel Timeo, one at the Palmiers in Palermo, and one at the Giappone in Livorno, and others in different towns in Italy. There were six or seven in all. Much

was written about the mysteries in the newspapers, but nothing was ever discovered."

"How were they 'curious'?" I inquired carelessly.

"In this way, signore, that some believed the deaths to have been due to murder. Bondi was always convinced that they had been, but was never able to prove anything. He used to become greatly excited if anybody chanced to broach the subject of these curious deaths. The last happened about a year ago, when a dancer at the Eden Theatre of Varieties, in Milan, was one morning found dead in her room. Upon her chest, as upon the chests or throats of each of the other victims—if they were victims—was found a strange mark burnt into the flesh, as it seemed with some powerful acid. In each case the mark was exactly the same—most strange."

"What was the mark?"

"Ah, Signor Bondi has often described it to me! He said it looked as though the victims had each been branded with some implement like a triangular button-hook. There was on the chest of each, he said, a distinct mark like three button-hooks pressed down together."

"Three button-hooks!" I gasped, staring at the man.

As I repeated the words my thoughts flashed back to Drew and his strange bequest, also to the last purchase that Quain had made before he had disappeared so mysteriously—those three button-hooks he had bought at Harrod's.

"Tell me more," I said as calmly as I could, after a moment's pause.

"There is nothing more to tell, signore," replied the man, dropping into Italian, a language with which I am acquainted. "Signor Bondi always hoped he would discover the murderer—if, indeed, the deaths were due to murder. What first made him so desperately interested in the matter was, I think, that he had himself known very well the poor girl of the Eden Theatre. Always generous with his money, in many

ways he was most kind. Often and often he helped poor and unknown artists, men as well as women. I knew him intimately, and sometimes he used to complain to me about these people's ingratitude. Gasperini, he told me once, had disappointed him enormously by his deep ingratitude. Signor Bondi never forgot or forgave that. I have said he was of a vengeful disposition. Had it not been for Signor Bondi, Volpi would never have been heard of, he would to-day be poor and living in obscurity. Instead he is, I am told, very rich indeed."

Though that was all that Ficarra told me, it set me thinking deeply. Here was another link, apparently, in this chain of mystery that I was so desperately anxious to fathom. What could be the secret of the button-hooks? There could be no doubt whatever, it seemed to me now, that those button-hooks must be symbolical of something, even that they might be some mystic sign or mark. But of what?

Two days passed, and Ficarra's conversation had half faded out of my mind. Rosemary was, apparently, again quite herself. No reference had been made to Gasperini, or to his music, but every evening Calvert and I had concocted some excuse for taking Rosemary out—away from the hotel. We were determined, if possible, to prevent a repetition of that evening's scene, yet we had no wish whatever to move to another hotel, the San Domenico being so exactly to our liking. Rosemary's complete silence on the subject of what had happened made us, however, feel uneasy. For she could not, we told each other, have forgotten all about it, so that she must have some secret reason for never alluding to it.

A fresh train of thought was created at this time by a letter I received from my aunt at Babbacombe. She had written to us, once or twice, letters which had entertained us, owing to the old-fashioned, quaint way she had of expressing herself. This letter, however, in spite of its quaint phraseology unsettled me a little.

In the first place a telegram had come for me from

Enrico Marco, a long telegram to the effect that "circumstances following upon the death of Drew had eventuated" which "made it imperative that I should at once come to London." That was the way he put it, and he had thought, when he telegraphed, that I was still at Babbacombe. This telegram my aunt had opened—in her letter she apologised for doing so, and gave her reasons—but I could read between the lines of her letter that it had alarmed her a good deal—it took very little to alarm her!

On the same day a telegram had come to the chalet, signed Sophie Verande. This telegram my aunt enclosed, unopened. She felt, she said, that to open two telegrams in one day "would be quite too much for her, especially as the first was of such an urgent nature."

The name "Sophie Verande" was entirely unknown to me, but in the telegram she explained. The lady had attended Drew's cremation, and been a very intimate friend of his. This, then, was the woman I had noticed at the funeral—the woman whose miniature I believed it was that I had found, and that I had with me still. She, too, begged me to come at once. The matter upon which she wished to see me was also very urgent, and concerned dead friends.

I am not unduly selfish, but when I reflected that I was in no way related to Drew, that he had not been even an intimate friend of mine, in spite of his declaration that I was his greatest friend; that his father was now back in England; and that to return to town would mean tearing myself away from Rosemary as well as from Sicily, I felt that I was being asked to do rather too much. Besides, the telegrams were now both some days old, so that even if I started for England then and there I should arrive probably too late to be of use.

Instead, therefore, I wrote to Enrico Marco and to Sophie Verande, and made up my mind patiently to await their replies. Days passed, however, and no answer came from either.

"Obviously," I said to Calvert, "whatever ~~they~~ wished to see me about must have been of less importance than they thought." And he agreed. Had I known then what I came to know soon afterwards, how much less satisfied I should have felt at the decision I had come to!

"A wonder who the two tall, dark men are I have seen about of late?" Rosemary said to me one afternoon as we were strolling together in the Corso Umberto at the hour of the aperitif. "They were in the hotel this morning—in the courtyard."

"What are they like?" I inquired carelessly.

"Oh, some sort of native! I should say they were Egyptians."

"Egyptians!" I exclaimed. "Tell me, are they black, or almost black?"

"Very dark indeed; yes, practically black."

"Where do you see them, and how often have you seen them?"

I suddenly felt greatly excited.

"I have seen them several times during the past days; but to-day is the first time I have seen them in the hotel," she answered.

"What were they doing there?"

"Nothing, apparently. Just sitting there as though awaiting someone."

I questioned her narrowly, and from her description of their appearance, I felt there could be no doubt that they were Gasperini's Nubians. My attempts to discover the whereabouts of Gasperini, or of Madame Joubert, had proved futile. Might it not, however, be possible to follow these men, and so find out what I wanted? They wore ordinary clothes, Rosemary said, yet I felt that I should be able to identify them from their features.

Days went by, and yet I did not meet them. Three times again Rosemary saw them, she told me, but each time she was alone. On one occasion they had again been at the San Domenico, in the courtyard. On the

other occasions they were walking down the street. No, they had not appeared to follow her, she said, in answer to my inquiry. In fact, they had seemed not to notice her at all.

This information made me more curious still. It might, of course, be merely by chance that Rosemary saw the natives, always when alone. Yet it seemed a peculiar coincidence that she should have seen them so often, whereas neither Calvert nor I had seen them even once.

The time we had decided to stay in Taormina was drawing to an end. But for the distressing incident on the night Gasperini had so strangely hypnotised Rosemary, the days had passed most pleasantly. We intended to return to England by way of Rome, Milan, and Paris, instead of by sea, and Rosemary had agreed that, immediately upon our arrival in London, our engagement should be announced. For this decision my aunt had been largely responsible. Several times at the chalet she had urged us to make public the news, and in other ways encouraged us to hasten our marriage. She had, as I have already explained, taken a great liking to Rosemary, and she feared that, were our marriage delayed unduly, some unforeseen occurrence might prevent its taking place. For that, as I came to know later, was what had happened in her own case in the days of long ago, leaving her a disappointed, though not an embittered woman.

"I feel so strange to-day, dear," Rosemary remarked one afternoon as we sat talking over the future. "I cannot explain the sensation, but a most curious sense of oppression has been gradually stealing over me. It began late last night, as I lay in bed. I have slept badly for several nights; last night I slept hardly at all."

She turned and looked at me. Her great eyes were filled with tears, and I saw an intensely sad, almost pathetic, expression in their violet depths, unlike any expression I had ever seen there before. Instinctively

I took her hand, anxious to console her, yet—for what reason did she need consolation?

So many strange things had happened during those past weeks; so many mysterious occurrences still remained unsolved; such curious, inexplicable warnings had been uttered, not by the woman Joubert only, but by Bondi, too—the cause of whose death I still regarded as a mystery—that Rosemary's mental depression and her premonition that evil of some kind was about to befall her, proved infectious.

I tried to reassure her, telling her the depression from which she suffered must be an after-effect of her illness, and that it would soon pass. But the more I talked, the more I felt my own spirits sinking, in spite of my determined efforts to appear cheerful and light-hearted.

"It's no good," she exclaimed at last. "It must come—do what we can to keep it off. No, it must come. I have tried hard to resist—every day I have tried; indeed I have, Cyril dear, but it's no good! Why continue to deceive ourselves? Things are arranged in this world by some Power we can neither fight against nor understand."

Suddenly she turned to me with burning eyes.

"Cyril," she exclaimed, almost fiercely clinging to me, "promise me one thing—you must, dear, oh, you must promise!"

Terribly distressed, for I had no idea what she had been trying to resist, I declared that I would promise anything in reason.

"If any calamity should occur," she went on quickly, "if anything should happen that may seem to you amazing, wholly unaccountable, you will not condemn me, dear, will you? I have done my best, I have indeed. Some strange force is overpowering, overwhelming me—impelling me against my will. I can't help it. I seem to feel it all around me as I have felt it for days past, but to-day its intensity has increased."

"Impelling you, my darling!" I cried, seriously

alarmed. "But how, and in what way? What is it you feel impelled to do?"

"I can't tell you. It would take long to explain. Only—only I beg of you, no matter what I may say or do in the days to come, not to judge me harshly—will you?" she implored. "I do love you, Cyril—ah, you know how passionately I love you, my own darling, but—but—I—I——"

She stopped abruptly, and, burying her troubled face in her hands, burst into bitter sobs.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE PROBLEM OF THE BUTTON-HOOKS.

My well-beloved was missed just before eight o'clock on the following morning.

The discovery of her disappearance paralysed my brain. The news had been brought to me by Calvert at breakfast-time, for, according to the night-porter, she had gone out of the hotel at one o'clock in the morning, and had not been seen since.

For some moments I sat motionless, unable to think or stir. Then, by supreme effort, I gathered together my scattered wits and set to work, as best I could, to consider what steps must be taken to find out where she had gone.

My first impression was that she must have been entrapped, and this belief was strengthened when I thought of the Egyptians she had seen so repeatedly. Then I reflected that to effect an abduction in a place like Taormina would be difficult indeed. Besides, there were signs which seemed to indicate that she had left the hotel of her own accord. Her dressing-bag was gone, as well as other of her belongings.

Inquiries made of the hotel-manager and his subordinates elicited several facts. In the first place a note had been delivered to her about half-an-hour before she left. It had been brought by a Sicilian youth, whom the night-porter, who received it, did not recollect having

ever seen before. Later Rosemary had come downstairs, carrying her bag, and passed out of the hotel without speaking to anyone. The hotel servant who had noticed her leave declared there had been nothing unusual in her appearance. Finally he was convinced, he said, that the lady would return. Someone must have called her away unexpectedly, and she had been unavoidably detained. He had known cases of the kind happen before; even to visitors at that hotel; and he went into long particulars, which I did not want to hear. None of the servants seemed really anxious about Rosemary, and, in a way, their confidence reassured me a little.

Calvert was of opinion that we should wait until afternoon before informing the police, pointing out how annoyed she would be were we to raise an alarm and then find there had been some good reason for her absence.

Never shall I forget those dreadful hours of misery, the feeling of helpless impotence which obsessed me as I roamed aimlessly first in one direction, then in another, then back to the hotel in a fever of anxiety, each time only to be told that no information of any kind had been received. By five that afternoon I could bear the strain no longer. Locked in my room alone, I tossed restlessly upon the bed, wondering and wondering.

Horrible visions arose before me. I saw Rosemary in Gasperini's power—kept there against her will. I saw her ill-used by him in a dozen different ways. I saw—

The visions changed. Rosemary was in his arms, and he was caressing her. In terms of passionate endearment she was pouring out her love, opening her very soul to him. Her mad infatuation, passion, whatever it might be, that for weeks had been pent up, was suddenly let loose to run headlong on its course. This, then, she had referred to when the day before she had so puzzled me by speaking of her struggle, and her efforts to resist. I had asked her what she meant, what she wanted to resist. "I cannot explain," her reply had been. Then the words returned to me that she had uttered that afternoon in tones so imploring, so heart-broken:

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"If any calamity should occur, if anything should happen that may seem to you amazing, wholly unaccountable, do not condemn me, do not judge me harshly, dear. Some strange force is overpowering, overwhelming me, impelling me against my will."

And I had promised—I had given her my word I would neither condemn nor judge her harshly. I confess that, for the moment, that recollection had escaped me. Now it rushed back into my thoughts, and on the instant I was determined to do as I had sworn. The calamity, the unknown "amazing thing" she had dreaded so instinctively, had come to pass. It was for me to prove my chivalry, my manhood, by trusting her implicitly in the face of damning evidence. For though nothing was yet known to me, there seemed, all things considered, but one solution to the problem.

She had gone to Gasperini!

What would the world say when this scrap of scandal reached it? I asked myself bitterly. That it must reach it soon was certain, for Taormina thrives on scandal and "disreputable" gossip.

It was blazing hot that afternoon, and it may have been owing to that as well as to the fact that for some reason I had hardly closed my eyes during the previous night that I unconsciously fell into a deep sleep.

When I awoke it was quite late, nearly nine o'clock. Someone was pounding at my bedroom door, and by the noise made I judged whoever it was had been knocking a long while. I sprang off my bed, unlocked the door, and opened it.

"A lady to see you, Signore," a waiter said curtly in Italian. "She gave no name, Signore; but she called at six o'clock and again an hour ago. This is the third time she has called, and she says if you are in, she must see you, for that the matter she wants to see you about is very important."

"Say I will be down in a moment."

My visitor rose as I entered the hotel lounge, a few minutes later. For a second I stood speechless, for

the woman before me was Theresa, Rosemary's late maid !

She had greatly changed in appearance. She looked pale, drawn, intensely harassed. Dark marks were beneath her deep-set eyes, as though she had not slept for nights.

" May I see you alone ? " she exclaimed pleadingly, almost in a whisper. " I have something serious to say."

For an instant I hesitated. Could I trust her, after all that had happened ? For some moments I looked hard at her, then, seeing that she seemed to be in grave trouble, I invited her to Rosemary's sitting-room.

" Well," I said, when I had shut the door, and we were alone together, " what have you to say ? "

In spite of her dejected air, I was in no mood to humour her in the least.

" I know that Miss Calvert has left here—that she went from here last night," she said, talking rapidly. " Did she leave a message ? Do you know where she has gone ? "

" She left no message. If you have news of her, I—you will be rewarded."

" I don't want your reward ! " she exclaimed quite hotly. " I will tell you where she is, for a reason of my own."

She paused, and breathlessly I waited.

" She has left Taormina—with Dario Gasperini ! They left for Palermo early this morning, and are crossing later to Naples. Madame Joubert has gone with them. They wanted me to go, but——"

" Yes ? Yes ? "

" I have found out something about Gasperini that I never knew. Had I known it months ago, never, never, should I have done what I have ! I have done with him for ever."

" But why did Miss Calvert go ? What can have induced her ? " I exclaimed, beside myself.

A strangely pathetic look came into the girl's eyes.

" She couldn't help it, any more than the woman

Joubert can help staying with them,—though his wife she detests him. He has an extraordinary power—he fascinates when he chooses to, and they cannot resist his spell. I have come to you, Mr. Fane, because I want to help you."

Still I was suspicious. Why should she wish to help me? Did she think I should pay her better than Gasperini? or was this yet another trick?

She met my gaze unflinchingly.

"Ah, I see!" she exclaimed suddenly. "You think that, because I made those horrible attempts—yes, I know you know about them—I am now not to be trusted. I am not surprised. It was terrible of me—I was mad at the time. I must have been. Later I will explain, and you will believe me, but now there is not a moment to be lost. If you wish to overtake them you must go at once to Messina, and on by train from Villa San Giovanni up to Naples. And if you take me with you I will help you."

What was I to say? What was I to think? If she lied to me and I followed her advice, then all hope of rescuing my beloved from the clutches of the monster who had taken her from me, would probably be lost. If, on the other hand, she spoke the truth, and I hesitated to do as she suggested—

For some time I pondered, for common sense warned me not to go. My instinct prompted me to act on her advice, and my instinct rarely errs. Therefore I determined to trust it now.

"I believe you," I said quickly. "I will come with you—now. My friend will come, too."

A look, partly of intense relief, I thought, but also of extreme satisfaction, came into her eyes.

"But tell me," I said abruptly, a thought striking me, "how is it you know Gasperini's plans—you say you know them. He would not, have dismissed you, knowing that you knew them; he would not at any cost, have let you leave him, knowing it lay in your power to do him harm."

"That is my concern," she answered calmly. "I have told you only the truth."

It took me half an hour to find Calvert, and at first he opposed my decision so strongly that I was almost tempted to reconsider it. When, however, I brought him face to face with Theresa, and they had talked for a little while, he ended by changing his mind. Far more difficult did I find it to persuade Jeans to believe the woman's story. I had deemed it advisable to take my servant entirely into my confidence, and again and again he doggedly repeated that he considered I was acting most unwisely. He had no faith whatever in the woman, he kept saying. After all that had happened—after all she had done——

"Jeans," I said sharply, becoming suddenly annoyed, "stop talking and pack my things. We leave early to-morrow. Everything I have told you to pack must be ready by then. The rest will be sent on."

We took the next train to Messina, and both Calvert and I had, of course—to Jeans' open indignation—talked at considerable length with Theresa after leaving Taormina, and we had, upon the whole, elicited from her much interesting information concerning both Gasperini and Madame Joubert.

For years, the girl said, she had known the woman Joubert. Some months previously she had been in deep distress at the loss of both her parents, and so greatly embarrassed financially that she was ready to do or dare anything to get money. It was then Joubert had made a terrible proposal to her, and though at first she had refused to entertain it, in the end she had agreed to do what Joubert asked, in return for a large sum of money. The nature of the services had at first only been hinted at, and not until later, when it was too late to draw back, did she become fully aware of their awful nature.

By that time, she continued—and we could see that she spoke the truth—the woman had her entirely in her power. The French woman had threatened, she said, that if she refused to do her bidding, she would make

known a certain criminal act she had already committed, which would inevitably have led to her being sentenced to imprisonment.

Gasperini's villa—called the *Vulino Beatrice*—which we found a day later, stood on a hill a little way out of Sorrento. It was a most picturesque spot. The villa itself was a square white place with dark green window frames and sun-shutters, and a roof of fluted red tiles, and a square tower at one end. A beautiful pergola of vines led up to the doorway, and the large garden in which the villa stood was a riot of flowers and shrubs, a natural jungle in which grew oranges and olives in plenty, oleanders, azaleas, tamarisk trees, bushes of green bay, and many tall, sombre cypresses. The irritating chirp of the cicada, those harbingers of heat, subsided to some extent as we moved about the garden, but directly we stood still it started again with, as it seemed to us, increased vigour.

It was growing dusk when we arrived there, and in all directions fire-flies flitted. Away in the distance, Vesuvius stood out against the sky-line, dark, ominous, casting its deep, lurid glare up against the dark purple of the sky that formed its heavy background. Sicily had been lovely, indeed, but the vivid, impressive picturesqueness of this delightful Arcadian spot that Gasperini had chosen for his home possessed a beauty and a fascination peculiarly its own.

We told the white moustached Italian servant that Gasperini expected us—for we had overtaken him—and the man readily believed us. He even went so far as to invite us in broken English to enter the villa, and an hour later, acting upon his own initiative, he served an excellent meal, to which we did full justice.

"Signor Gasperini," he said, as though apologising for his hospitality, "has told me always to be hospitable to his friends."

The humour of the situation struck me keenly, for, as the meal had been prepared without our knowledge, and we had upon entering the dining-room, found places for

four, naturally we had all been compelled to dine together—Calvert, myself, Jeans and the maid Theresa. I wondered what Gasperini would say—what he would think if, upon his arrival with Rosemary and Joubert, he should find us all there in his villa, uninvited, partaking of his hospitality unasked. What a wiggling that luckless servant would get later on!

But time passed, and still no one came. We had engaged rooms at Bertolini's in Naples, and towards eleven o'clock we decided that the only thing to be done was to return there, for clearly Gasperini would not arrive that night. The ultra-hospitable servant had suggested that, as we were friends of his master, we should spend the night in the Villino Beatrice, but at that we had drawn the line. There is such a thing as over-stepping the bounds of one's welcome!

Upon our returning to the villa very early on the following morning I was greatly perturbed at being told by the servant that Signor Gasperini had changed his plans. He had telegraphed from Rome—the servant indiscreetly showed us the message—to say that he was returning direct to London. It was a very long telegram, and contained many orders for the servant to execute. One of these orders was that, if any strangers should call, and make inquiries concerning their master's movements, their curiosity was not to be gratified. The Italian servant, upon handing me the telegram, remarked ingenuously that, of course, that warning could not be meant to apply to us, as we were such friends of his master's! I felt tempted to smile as he said this, for certainly we had never told or hinted to him that Gasperini was a friend of ours. He had himself arrived at that conclusion without any help whatever, unless, indeed, the handsome tip he had received from us on the previous evening had unduly biassed his judgment.

I should have enjoyed that brief visit to Naples, but for my anxiety about Rosemary. Was she still with the woman Joubert, and with Gasperini? No other alter-

native seemed possible, for she could not well have left them.

The Rome-Paris express did not leave, we found, until the afternoon, and, being in an inquisitive mood, I decided that I would, without telling Calvert, Jeans or Theresa, pay yet another visit to Villino Beatrice, entirely on my own account. We had seen only three of the rooms on the previous evening, and somehow I felt that I should like to see them all. The old retainer had expressed such excessive gratitude upon my pressing a gold coin into his palm on the previous evening, and another in the morning, that I knew for certain that a third *douceur* would, so to speak, set him at my mercy.

Nor was I mistaken. After a few minutes' light conversation with him in the beautiful garden of the villa, I took a convenient opportunity of bestowing largesse upon him once more. A little later I said carelessly :

"I suppose there's plenty of accommodation here—eh?"

He fell into the trap at once. "Oh, yes, Signore, plenty accommodation, large apartments. Would the Signore like to see them?" he asked in his broken English.

*The villa was even bigger than I had expected to find it. In these rooms, darkened against the sun's glare, were unmistakable signs of its owner's eccentricity. Everything was unusual, bizarre, and one room almost exactly resembled in its "atmosphere" the two Oriental apartments of the house in Grove End Road. Another was entirely Louis Seize, while in the third the servant showed me, with as much pride as though he himself possessed them, a number of beautiful antiques.

Two rooms, however, interested me more than all the rest; in the first the walls were hung with drawings and paintings, executed in a horribly lifelike way, of different sorts of animals, contorted into unnatural attitudes that must have been most painful. In all there were twenty or more, and I thought I had never before set eyes on such a dreadful collection.

"Signor Gasperini lets hardly anyone come here, Signore," the man said to me in a sort of stage whisper, "but he would of course admit the Signore, who is such a great friend."

"What is the idea—what is the meaning of these pictures?" I inquired, contemplating them still; indeed, unable to look away from them.

"Ah, but they are paintings from life!" the man answered, apparently astonished at my lack of comprehension, my stupidity.

A horrible, cruel grin overspread his face, and instinctively I recoiled from him. What a monster he must be to be capable of grinning at the thought of the agonies those poor creatures endured! And Gasperini! The more I thought of him, the more deeply I seemed to loathe him. And Rosemary was with him! One thought consoled me a little. Theresa had assured me that Joubert would prevent injury being done to Rosemary, not out of love for Rosemary, but because she dreaded what we might do if evil should befall her. Again and again Theresa had declared that, at any rate, until England was reached Rosemary would not suffer, except through her natural anxiety and fear.

"The Signore is a very artful man," the Italian retainer continued. "He has invented—but the Signore shall see."

It was then he conducted me into the room adjoining. I at once saw that it was used as a laboratory. There were cupboards everywhere, glass cases, rows upon rows of drawers along the wall, all with little labels stuck upon them. And all about the room, on tables, on long shelves, even upon the floor, were curious-looking instruments and metal and wooden implements, ingeniously-constructed contrivances with screws and clamps and wires. One side of the room was an immense mirror, which, as one looked into it, conveyed the impression that the room was twice its size.

A dreadful feeling of horror and indignation crept over me as I looked about, and, without meaning to, I shud-

dered. Good heavens! That such things should be. So great was the fury I felt, so hotly did my blood boil, that had Gasperini at that moment entered the room I believe I should have sprung at him and tried to strangle him.

Suddenly my gaze rested upon a little implement that lay with others upon a shelf. I approached, picked it up, then examined it with extreme interest.

•“What is this used for?” I inquired of the Italian, speaking as calmly as I could.

“That, Signore?” he answered. “Ah, I cannot say. How should I know? The Signore must ask the Signore Gasperini.”

The implement was a kind of triple button-hook. The handles of two of the hooks had been filed off, the short stems being soldered to the handle of the middle stem. It was not unlike a broad arrow reversed, with a handle at the apex, the points of the three “legs” being button-hooks set sideways.

The hooks were made of brass!

CHAPTER XXIV.

FROM SEA TO SEA.

By the time we arrived at Charing Cross I knew a great deal more about Gasperini than I had known before, or ever expected to learn.

Theresa, at first secretive and suspicious, had gradually grown more and more communicative and confiding, and even Jeans had at last come to my way of thinking with regard to her, therefore I was not a little surprised when, on the morning we left Paris, he volunteered that he had been mistaken in the opinion he had formed of her while in Taormina.

"And I don't feel spiteful about her neither," he added, expanding with self-righteousness at the thought of his magnanimity. "She admits she tried to poison me, sir; but it was not her fault, poor girl, and I forgive her—I truly do, sir. She has explained everything to me that made her do it, more than what she told you, I shouldn't wonder. She tells me she told you she was to blame for Miss Calvert's illness, sir, and that you believed her when she explained all that led to that. She's a different woman now from what she was, sir; and that's a fact. It's strange how some folks influences each other, sir. It all come from that accursed foreign hound, Gasperini, and that woman he's got along with him and calls his wife. He's been the cause of this trouble and expense, sir; of every bit of it, I'm sure.

I'm as sure of that as I am I'm talking to you now. I never did like them foreigners—never; and now I 'ates the sight of them."

To you, my reader, it may seem amazing that I could bring myself to pardon a woman who had so deliberately attempted to poison the one woman I cared for in life; but had you heard from the lips of that victim of a base conspiracy, the whole story of what had happened first of all, as I heard it, you would realise, I think, that, had I not pardoned her, I should indeed have been inhuman.

Besides, by doing so I had made Theresa my ally, and a valuable ally she afterwards proved—staunch, true, in every sense trustworthy. Had I, as had at first been my intention, handed her over to the Italian police on a charge of deliberately conspiring to poison first Jeans, and then Rosemary, I should never—so far as I can now see—have at last succeeded in fathoming the various mysteries connected directly and indirectly with the great musician.

And Louise Joubert, too. What a terrible life hers had been, according to Theresa. The two women had long been acquainted—there was something intensely ironical in the reflection that both had been educated in a French convent, the Convent of the Sacre Cœur! Joubert had been thirty when her desperate infatuation for the violinist had suddenly manifested itself, which had ended in his making her his wife.

His wife! Heavens! To think it should be in any man's power to treat a woman as he had treated her, torturing her mentally in horrible ways, and taking fiendish pleasure in watching those mental agonies he created. Never had I heard of anything so terrible, anything so callous and cold-blooded. To intentionally cause physical suffering is villainous, but to cause mental torture by forcing an impressionable, highly-strung, extremely sensitive woman to watch horrible physical agonies inflicted intentionally upon defenceless creatures—could any crime be more despicable, more wholly revolting?

This, I learned from Theresa, was what Gasperini had done, not once or twice, but many times; so often indeed, that in the end his wife fled from him, only to be drawn back to him again and again by that inexpressibly weird, magnetic power which he possessed.

My friends tell me I am too cosmopolitan, and laugh at me because I disbelieve entirely in class distinction, though naturally class distinction will obtain as long as the human race exists. Fortunate it was that at that time I already held those views and acted up to them, for had I not become friendly with the girl Theresa—whose life's record was peculiar, to say the least—much useful information that I obtained from her would probably never have reached me. As it was, I feel to this day indebted to her for first setting me upon the road which ultimately led to the discovery of Gasperini's perfidy, the solution of the mystery of Quain's disappearance, the actual cause of Drew's suicide, and the solution of minor mysteries.

Among the latter was the reason Gasperini had been in possession of Rosemary's portrait which, on the occasion of my first visit to him, I had found upon his escritoire in that odd room with the mirror ceiling, the great bowls of golden carp, and the strange lights and reflections.

For, curiously enough, Theresa knew all about my visits to Gasperini, and what had happened on each occasion. Joubert had been with Gasperini at that time, and the fact of his furious infatuation for Rosemary had led to one of the many violent altercations he had had with his wife. The first time he had seen Rosemary had been at a concert where he played. She had been seated in the stalls, when his gaze had accidentally met hers. From that moment onward he had determined to draw her to him, and whenever she had been present where he played, he had deliberately sought her out.

But now, Theresa declared, Joubert was no longer jealous. On the contrary, she was, if anything, well disposed towards Rosemary. That, the girl said, might

have been due to Gasperini's hypnotism, just as Joubert's action in directing Theresa to administer the slow-acting poisonous drug, had been directly due to Gasperini's influence and not to Joubert's initiative.

"Gasperini had so often forced his will upon his wife—yes, Louise Joubert is his legal wife——" she said, "that the woman's will had come to be wholly controlled by his."

"But Bondi!" I exclaimed quickly; "how came he to possess such power over Gasperini? A man of his great age—I should have thought, from what you say, that Gasperini's will could with ease have overpowered so old a man."

"Ah, but you don't know!" answered the girl at once. "It was Bondi who first discovered the extraordinary magnetism of Gasperini's personality, and who taught Gasperini the way to use his will-power to its fullest extent. It is said that in his youth Bondi was even more amazing than Gasperini is to-day, in the hypnotic power he possessed. Bondi, consequently, was proof against Gasperini, proof against his will—and Gasperini knew it. But he knew more than that. He knew Bondi to be the only man aware of the crimes he had committed, and able to prove his guilt. Bondi had done everything for Gasperini: he had made him what he is. Yet Gasperini turned upon his benefactor when he became poor. From then onward, Bondi's mind became set upon revenge. Had he lived, he would have wreaked his vengeance, for his desire to do so had grown to be an obsession."

"But why, then," I asked, "did Bondi refrain from wreaking his vengeance?"

"Why? Because Gasperini found him money—Bondi repeatedly threatened to expose him if he did not give him as much money as he asked for. And think what such an exposure would have meant. It might have meant the gallows."

"The gallows!" I exclaimed. "Heavens! Then is Gasperini actually a murderer?"

The girl stopped abruptly, as though suddenly aware that she had said more than she intended to.

"Tell me, tell me quickly," I urged excitedly, an idea flashing upon me, "those mysterious deaths—one in Taormina—one in Leghorn—one in Milan—the little dancer from the Eden Theatre of Varieties, who was found dead in her rooms—the other strange deaths in different parts of Italy, six or seven in all—Bondi's repeatedly-expressed conviction that the deaths were due to murder—that mysterious mark branded upon the chest, or throat, as if by some strong acid! Tell me—tell me all you know!"

The girl stared at me, terror in her big, wide-open eyes. Her chest rose and fell. She trembled from head to foot.

"Ah! What have I said!" she gasped. "Forget it, forget everything I have said, Mr. Fane—oh, if he should find that I have told, he would kill me—I didn't know, I had no idea you knew—who told you this? Who can have told you all that you have just said!"

Had I not myself beheld this sudden change in her attitude I could not have believed this girl, who until now had been so calm, so unemotional, could become, all at once, so different.

For nearly a minute I did not speak. Theresa sat there staring into my eyes, terrified, speechless. Clear to me now it was that, though she had told me much about Gasperini, she knew far more than she meant to tell. And yet, but for that casual visit to Ficarra, in Taormina, I should never have suspected Gasperini of being a murderer, for the discovery of the button-hooks would have conveyed nothing to my mind.

"Don't distress yourself," I said reassuringly. "Everything that you have told me—and anything more you may tell—will never be repeated. You can trust me absolutely. Indeed I can assure you that I feel so grateful for the information you have given me that the last thing I should think of doing would be to repeat anything that you have said."

"Thank you, oh, thank you!" she answered, evidently immensely relieved. "I have told you more than I intended. I cannot think how you found out about that mark, the mark of the three button hooks. Joubert is the only one who knows, besides myself, now that Bondi is dead."

- This, then, was the beginning of the solution of one problem at least—the problem of the button-hooks. It now remained for me to find out why Quain had bought those button-hooks at Harrods before he disappeared, and why Drew had left me the button-hooks before he ended his life, left with them, too, such explicit instructions that I should keep them by me. The words he had written on the very eve of his death now returned to me.

Suddenly I started. Could the three button-hooks Quain had bought, and the three that Drew had left to me be identical!

Yes, that seemed quite probable. The hooks Quain had bought had been made of brass—a metal of which button-hooks are rarely made. Those that had been Drew's were also made of brass.

But why brass?

I began to think this over. Brass, I remembered, had various properties not possessed by other metals. It became tarnished more easily than most metals, with the exception of silver. Treated in certain ways—left in damp salt, for instance—it could generate virulent poisons, of which verdigris is only one. Gasperini was an expert toxicologist, and in his student days had studied poisons with Mario Bondi. And Calvert, too, was an authority upon poisons. I would ask him.

Calvert delivered quite a prosy discourse to me upon my propounding this problem to him, which reminded me—though I did not remind him of the bitter way he had complained of Professor Loughton's diffuseness, that evening at Hornton Street. In the end, however, I succeeded in eliciting from him that brass, dipped in a certain acid, the name of which he told me, would, if then quickly brought into contact with bare flesh, leave upon

it a mark as indelible as though the flesh had been branded with a hot iron.

That information was satisfactory, to the extent that it seemed to fit in with a theory I had now formed. My theory was, first, that Gasperini had been responsible directly or otherwise, for those mysterious deaths in Italy; secondly, that the deaths had been caused by means of some poison which could not afterwards be identified, even by experts; thirdly, that for some reason, which I had still to discover, each of his victims was branded with the mark of the three button-hooks. I now felt certain, too, that the curious triple button-hook I had seen in that chamber of horrors in the Villino Beatrice was the actual instrument used, or one of several such instruments.

London looked as usual, full of activity and bustle, when at last we arrived after our three days' journey from Naples. But for Theresa's repeated words of reassurance that no harm would befall Rosemary, the whole of that journey home would have been a nightmare of anxiety for me. As it was, Calvert and I felt almost in good spirits as our taxi passed out of the station yard, and sped rapidly past the National Gallery on its way to my chambers in Half Moon Street. I had arranged that Calvert should dine with me there, and that directly after dinner we should set to work to formulate some plan for discovering Gasperini's movements, and if possible his whereabouts. That he must be back in London we felt practically certain.

"There has been a lot of inquiries for you on the 'phone, sir," said the man who had looked after my chambers during jeans' absence, as soon as we arrived. "And a lady has called here several times during these last days, sir. She seemed most exceedingly anxious to see you, sir; but she wouldn't leave any name. I told her when she come again yesterday as you was expected to-night, sir, between nine and ten."

"What was she like?" I asked quickly. A vague hope rose in me that it might actually be Rosemary.

"Well, sir, I can't say as I much noticed, except as she was dressed all in black, seemed to be in mourning, sir, and—oh, yes, sir, she had quitered hair."

"That's your mysterious friend who telegraphed to Tacmina," Calvert said. "You had better see her. She may have important news."

"And the telephone," I said to the man. "Who telephoned?"

"A Mr. Marco, sir. He's telephoned four or five times. Wants to see you at once, sir; as soon as you arrive would I ask you to please 'phone him, he said, sir. Oh, and there's a telegram come the morning before last, sir."

He went into my sitting-room, and returned with the telegram.

Hurriedly I tore it open.

"Why!" I gasped. "Poor old lady! I had no idea she was even ill!" Then I turned to Calvert, saying: "George, my poor old aunt at Babbacombe has died; she died two days ago, and the funeral is to be the day after to-morrow at Torquay."

Calvert was genuinely distressed. He had taken quite a fancy to the old lady, and while we had been abroad had frequently spoken about her and of her extreme kindness to Rosemary.

We were still discussing the sad event, and I had told Calvert that, of course, come what might, I should be obliged to go to Devonshire on the following night to attend the funeral, when the telephone rang loudly.

"See who it is, will you?" I said to the man. "Or, no," I turned to Jeans, who had just arrived with the luggage, "you answer it, Jeans, and if it's anybody you know I don't want to talk to, say I've not yet returned. If it's Mr. Marco, or a lady whose voice you don't know, and who won't give her name, tell them to hold the line, and I'll speak."

As I stood by, watching him while he spoke, I saw his expression suddenly change.

"Yes," he said, speaking into the receiver, "Mr.

Fane has just arrived—hold the line—don't go away, please—Mr. Fane will speak to you at once."

Jeans was trembling with excitement as he held the receiver out to me.

"Please, sir, it's two ladies—the lady speaking says her name is Miss, Miss—it sounds like Verender—she says Miss Calvert is with her, waiting to speak to you——"

"Rosemary!" I gasped, as I sprang forward to the instrument.

"Hello! Hello!" I shouted. "Who is that? It's I—it's Fane speaking! Who are you? You—Rosemary darling—is it you? Tell me——"

CHAPTER XXV.

CONFESSION !

"Who is it?" I demanded again, as there was no reply.

Some moments passed. Then, in a fever of impatience, I tapped the telephone lever half-a-dozen times. My efforts were rewarded.

The speaker, Sophie Verande, introduced herself. She was at Hornton Street, she explained, and Rosemary was with her. Could I come at once, with Mr. Calvert?

"Yes," I said, "but please ask Miss Calvert to speak to me." I longed to hear the voice of my well-beloved again.

"She cannot come to the telephone, I'm afraid," answered Miss Verande. "Can I give her any message?"

"She can't speak to me? Why not?" I asked, suddenly anxious.

"She feels tired and is lying down," came the reply.

"Is she ill?"

"Slightly unwell—that's all. Won't you come at once, Mr. Fane?"

"We'll come immediately, in a taxi," I answered, and turning to Jeans, I told him to call one.

Neither Calvert nor I spoke as we sped along. We feared something must be amiss, yet dared not think what. Surely Rosemary would, otherwise, have come to the telephone.

In the bright, well-lit drawing-room at Hornton Street where I had spent so many pleasant hours, a tall, slim, beautiful girl, with the most wonderful red-gold hair I had ever seen, sat awaiting us. She rose as we entered, and at once I recognised the original of that miniature I had found in the pocket of poor Drew's dressing-gown. Without speaking, she glanced questioningly from one to the other, apparently embarrassed.

"Let me introduce Mr. Calvert—Miss Calvert's uncle," I said. "I am Cyril Fane."

"At last!" she exclaimed in a low voice, as it seemed to me unconsciously. "Oh, I'm so glad you have both come at last; I have much to say to you."

"But Rosemary—I want to see her," I interrupted impetuously. "Is she in her room?"

"Yes, but—do you mind speaking to me before you go to her?"

Her tone was so pathetic, her manner so pleading, that we could not refuse her request.

"It is merely this," she went on quickly, when Calvert had closed the door. "Rosemary has received a shock, from which she is only gradually recovering. She will tell you everything, as far as she can; but first I want to warn you not to excite her when you see her, nor to question her, nor to allude in any way to what has happened. Will you remember that?"

"Why, of course," Calvert said. "Miss Verande, you will, I am sure, forgive my asking, but how do you come to know my niece, and to be here? My friend Fane tells me he has not, until to-day, had the pleasure of meeting you, and that, until you telegraphed to him at Taormina, he had never heard your name."

She paused, lowering her eyes, and I saw the colour mounting to her cheeks. Then, looking up suddenly, she said:

"I was an intimate friend of Mr. Maynard Drew. This month he was to have announced our engagement, and we were to have been married almost at once. He introduced me to Miss Calvert at the Amphytrion Club,

to which we both belonged, and she and I are friends. She told me that she had never spoken to you about me, but she intended to—to introduce you both when my engagement to Mr. Drew was disclosed. I am an artist's model by profession, and Rosemary thought—she thought that——”

She hesitated, became confused, and looked down at the carpet.

“Then Miss Calvert has been told of Mr. Drew's death?” I inquired quickly.

“I broke the news to her this morning,” she answered; “I did not intend to, but she spoke to me about him, and—well, suddenly I broke down, and then it all came out. She was terribly distressed. It was partly due to that news that she is so upset to-night.”

We were, however, still greatly mystified. It seemed so strange that Rosemary should have escaped from Gasperini, that this unknown girl, Sophie Verande, should apparently have met her immediately upon her arrival in London, and yet Rosemary had never even mentioned her name to us. True, in Taormina I had not told Rosemary how I had received a telegram from someone I had never before heard of, because she would have asked me to show her the telegram in question, and, seeing it, must at once have asked me what had befallen Drew. I had still to learn why Miss Verande, and also Enrico Marco, had sent me such pressing messages saying they wished to see me at once, but I was now so impatient to see Rosemary that I decided not to question Miss Verande further until I first met my love.

“It will be better, I think,” Calvert said, “for us to go to Rosemary separately. I know you badly want to see her, Cyril, so if you care to go first I'll stay and talk a little to Miss Verande. You needn't hurry.”

I confess that this remark of Calvert's rather surprised me, though I did not think much about it at the moment, my mind being taken up with Rosemary. Thanking him

for his consideration, I left him with our new acquaintance, and made my way, leaping up the stairs, to Rosemary's little sitting-room.

She was in a great armchair, her head propped with pillows of daffodil silk, her long auburn hair hanging loose about her shoulders. She looked hard at me as I entered, but neither spoke, smiled, or made any sign of recognition. Startled by her demeanour I approached slowly, then stood beside her chair. Still she remained silent, her eyes with a strange light in them fixed on mine. The situation became embarrassing, unpleasant. How different was this meeting from what I expected it to be. I began to regret that George Calvert had not come to see her first. She might have some reason for not addressing me, but she would hardly have reason for not speaking to him.

Thus half a minute passed. Then, all at once she sat upright in her chair.

"Why don't you speak to me, Cyril?" she asked in a hard, petulant voice. "Are you ashamed of me now?"

"Ashamed of you, my darling!" I exclaimed, a flood of emotion rushing in upon me. "Ashamed of you? Oh, how can you say such a thing as that!"

And then, my feelings getting the better of me, I suddenly sank on to my knees beside her chair, and seizing her hand covered it with kisses.

As I glanced up a moment later I saw to my joy that her expression had completely changed. Again that sweet affectionate look I knew so well and loved so much was in her eyes, and again her warm hands pressed mine, while I saw her lips quiver as she gazed down upon me, and tears started into her eyes.

"I thought—I—I feared——" she exclaimed in a tremulous whisper, "feared lest after what has happened you might have changed towards me—yes, although you did promise, you know, that day at Taormina, not to think harshly of me no matter what might happen. Oh, Cyril! if you only knew the agony of mind that I have suffered since we last met, you would indeed pity me.

All has been so strange, so unreal, so terrible—so absolutely horrible.”

“Don’t talk—don’t think about it,” I cried, seeing how the recollection pained her, and remembering Miss Verande’s warning. “I don’t want to hear; I don’t want to know. That you were in some way influenced—forced against your will—I am certain from what I have since been told about that man. Forget it all, my own darling; let us talk of other things. Oh! what joy it is to have you back—to find you safe and well after—in spite of what has happened!”

I kissed her passionately, and she clung to me, as though seeking my protection. But my attempt to change her train of thought proved of no avail. Against my wish she made me listen to the whole story of what had occurred during the time she had been conscious.

She told me that, from that night in Taormina when Gasperini’s music had affected her so strangely, the thought of the great world-renowned violinist had been ever in her mind. Day after day she had fought with herself in endeavouring to think no more about him, if possible to forget that he even existed, but, all alas! in vain. Her striving to forget produced the opposite effect. At night, hour after hour, she would lie awake thinking of the deep-eyed genius, and time after time she would, in imagination, see him standing there before her, staring down into her eyes with his mesmeric unfathomable gaze.

Then, by degrees, came the feeling that she must go to him—a feeling she had endeavoured to combat. Three times she had risen in the night, impelled by some mystic force to go in search of him, but each time she had succeeded in overcoming the fierce fascination that had fallen upon her.

On that fatal evening the impulse had been too strong for her. All day it had increased in intensity, and when in the morning she had so earnestly implored me not to judge her harshly, no matter what might occur, she instinctively knew that the crisis was at hand.

"I remember leaving the hotel San Domenico," she murmured to me. "After that my mind became an entire blank. How I discovered Gasperini I have no idea. When at last I awoke I was lying in a berth on board some boat—I can hear its engines now when I think of them," she added with a shudder. "Madame Joubert, whom I knew through having met at the Amphytrion Club, was standing by. She took my hand, spoke to me soothingly—attempted to reassure me—for I felt confused, and suddenly afraid."

My love then surprised me by telling me Joubert had been kind to her from then onward. Gasperini, it seemed, had been taken suddenly ill. His illness had apparently been mental, and only the Nubians who were with him had been able to control him. The great artist's intention, Joubert had said, had been to hypnotise her as soon as she was conscious, and to do so again and again. By this means he would in the end have destroyed her will entirely, and made her a puppet in his hands.

His sudden illness, however, had been most opportune, for it destroyed temporarily his magnetic force, as Joubert had told her she knew from previous experience it would. He was still very ill, yet refused to see a doctor. Joubert remained by him, doing all she could to help him.

"But," I exclaimed in surprise, "I cannot understand this woman, Joubert. She appears to me to be a mass of inconsistencies. She was desperately jealous, apparently, when first Gasperini became attracted by you; then at Paignton she told me that, though his wife, she no longer lived with him, that she hated the very sight of him, and yet she assured me that, in a way, she still loved him! Now she is with him again, beneath his roof day and night; she is no longer jealous of you; and yet she helped him, I suppose, to persuade you to elope with him. Is she mad—this woman?" I cried.

"Ah, you don't understand, Cyril!" Rosemary an-

swered quickly, looking at me again with that strange glance she had so often done since Gasperini had first attracted her. "Gasperini is mad, I firmly believe, but not Joubert. Joubert is in his power. He makes her say things she does not mean. One day she appears to love him, the next she seems to hate him. His will is hers when he is in health. Only at other times, as now, can she act as she wishes."

"But this is incomprehensible !" I exclaimed.

"While on board the steamer, also in the train, he remained ill, mentally as well as physically," she went on, "and I did not see him at all, for he was kept in a different compartment. At the Gare de Lyon in Paris Madame Joubert telegraphed, asking Sophie Verande to meet her to-day at an address she gave. She met her, and was amazed at finding me with her. Then it was arranged that Sophie should bring me home, and stay with me here until we had news of you, or I could tell you what had happened, and where I was. We had no idea until Sophie called at your chambers that you and uncle were on your way home. I nearly cried from happiness when Sophie told me."

Though I tried to prevent her, she continued talking, rapidly, excitedly, sometimes disjointedly. From what Joubert had told her about Gasperini, I judged that he must indeed, be a more remarkable personality than even I had suspected. I now realised that he must in more respects than one be mad, entirely insane and irresponsible for his actions. The things Joubert had told me he had done of late proved that his mind must be entirely unhinged. And yet this strange, magnetic, mental force still remained. Seldom had any living man been possessed of such gigantic will-power, such phenomenal mesmeric force as this mad musician, with whose life mine had become so inextricably mixed.

Why had he given up playing on the public platform? That, I admit, puzzled me a good deal, for, by now, I was convinced that there could be no truth in Joubert's assurance that the man had lost his nerve.

That, obviously, must have been said intentionally to deceive me, yet he must have had some reason for thus suddenly cancelling his engagements for the whole of the London season, which was now practically at an end.

And that reason, my instinct told me, must have had some bearing upon the amazing and mysterious disappearance of Cuthbert Quain, of whom nothing had since been seen or heard.

CHAPTER XXVI.

UNRAVELLING THE SKEIN.

WHEN I returned to Calvert I was surprised to find him alone. So engrossed was he in meditation, staring at nothing, that he did not hear me enter. When I spoke, he looked up with a start.

"Why," I exclaimed, "where is Miss Verande?"

"Miss Verande?" he repeated, and he seemed to hang on the name. "She's gone—why?"

"Why!" I echoed. "Because she said she had a lot to tell me—important things to say to me."

"Oh, that's all right!" he answered calmly. "She gave me the messages to give you. How did you find Rosemary?"

I told him about her, adding that he had better go at once to see her, as she wanted to go to bed. To my astonishment he now displayed no great hurry to go, but sat talking to me, talking ostensibly of what Miss Verande had asked him to tell me, but in reality about the pretty girl herself.

Never before had I known my old friend Calvert to gossip so long, or so persistently about any one person—least of all about a woman. It really was astonishing. Had I been a woman I should, I suppose, have realised the truth more quickly than I did, for women are said to jump to conclusions where men only crawl to them. But at last I saw how it was with Calvert.

He was in love! George Calvert—the unapproachable, the recluse so far as women were concerned—had in the space of comparatively a few minutes, fallen desperately, outrageously in love with the beautiful red-haired girl whom I believed to be in possession of the secret of Drew's death. Now I knew why he had suggested my going first to see Rosemary. It was not, as he had given me to understand, because he knew I was so anxious to see her. There had been no self-abnegation on his part, nothing in the least self-sacrificing or heroic. To put it bluntly, he wanted to get rid of me. At first sight, apparently, he had fallen feverishly—nay wildly in love with Sophie Verande—this strange girl we had neither of us before set eyes on—and in order to speak to her in private he had suggested that I should see Rosemary at once.

Calvert, my bald-headed old friend, in love with an artist's model! It was really too funny. Had any friend confided to him that he intended to marry an artist's model, Calvert would have been the first to upbraid him and strive to dissuade him from doing so. The more I thought of it, the more amused I became. Indeed, it so tickled me that I was tempted to go back to Rosemary then and there, and break the news to her. Only I feared the shock might upset her. It would have amused her so.

Naturally I made no sign or observation that might have led Calvert to think I had discovered his wonderful secret. What I wanted to know, and what seriously interested me even more than the discovery I had just made, was why Sophie Verande had wanted to see me, and what she had wished to tell me. Calvert had said he knew, so I set to work to question him.

What he proceeded to tell me interested me greatly. I already knew that Sophie Verande had been engaged to Drew. Calvert now told me that she had been Drew's one and only confidant. She alone knew what had driven him to commit his awful crime. He had not been blackmailed, strictly speaking, but he had been threa-

tened by a woman who had much to gain, and naught to lose.

A truly terrible woman, she was one of those parasites who prey upon human weaknesses, who will dare anything and stand at nothing. Drew had long ago committed a crime, and this woman knew it. She knew, too, that were she to reveal the truth, poor Drew's life must be wrecked for ever, leaving him an outcast social pariah.

Ah! Why had I not, I thought, as I listened to what Calvert repeated to me, offered to lend Drew those six hundred pounds that day he had come into my office, and unbosomed his soul to me, telling me of the bank-notes which had been stopped? I could easily have done so, for, at the moment, I had a fairly good balance at my bank. That, evidently, was what Drew had hoped I should suggest when he told me what had happened. Why then, had he not asked me outright? No, his fear that I might refuse had tied his tongue. It was dreadful—dreadful to think that perhaps I had unwittingly driven him to his death. Certainly, had he asked me, I should have lent him the money, for I believed him to be, in spite of his faults, the soul of honour. He would, had he given me his word, have repaid the amount as soon as he possibly could.

And what had happened after he had left me that day? I could only picture it in my imagination. Driven into a corner to find money, he must have brooded over his trouble, let it prey upon his mind. And then he had taken the awful leap, by forging one of his firm's cheques!

"But who stopped the bank-notes?" I inquired, when Calvert paused for a moment in his narrative.

"Gasperini did," he answered. "They were Gasperini's bank-notes. They had been extorted from him by blackmail. Bondi had extorted them."

Bondi!

In a flash it all came back to me. I knew everything. Those were some of the notes I had seen Bondi counting

so carefully as he sat beside Madame Joubert in the Café Royal on that well-remembered Saturday afternoon. Gasperini must have known their numbers, and at once stopped them. The man who had paid them to Drew—a man Drew had himself told me he had met at a club and knew nothing about—must have been a friend of Bondi's. And Louise Joubert must then have been in league with Bondi against her husband, Gasperini! How quickly the extraordinary tangle of mysterious events was now unravelling itself.

"Did Miss Verande tell you this?" I suddenly asked Calvert. "What did the woman who so threatened Drew want him to do?"

"Yes," he answered, "she did. Drew told her, and her only. The woman was in a position to find at once the six hundred pounds of which Drew stood in such urgent need to prevent the discovery of the forgery he had committed in a moment of madness. And she would have paid him the money at once, in gold; she even showed it to him, for she had it upon her the last time she went to see him. She would have handed it to him then and there if——"

"Yes? Yes?"

"If he would reveal a certain secret known only to the firm in which he was a partner. That secret had to do with a great financial transaction of world-wide importance. To have revealed it would have meant the ruin of hundreds—probably thousands—of poor people, whose savings were invested in an industrial concern believed to be absolutely sound. Poor Drew had already committed a crime. To do what this woman—a woman well-known in Society—strove to force him into doing, would have been to commit a crime infinitely greater, a crime which would have caused untold misery, and driven many to despair. It lay with him to choose one of two alternatives. The first was to reveal the secret which would bring ruin and starvation into so many happy homes, and himself go free—for none could ever have discovered how the secret had leaked out. The

other was to wreck his own life by letting his forgery be discovered, as he saw it was bound to be if he could not at once find the money—the wretched six hundred pounds! His attempts to raise a post-obit upon his father had failed. Extremely sensitive by nature, he could not face the disgrace any more than he would, he felt, know a moment's peace were he to do what the woman so tempted him to do. And so——”

He stopped abruptly, and we both remained silent. The whole affair was too horrible to think of. Oh! why—why had not the poor fellow opened his heart to me that day, explained to me the awful predicament he was in, told me everything and asked me to lend him the money? Readily I would have done so. Willingly, under the circumstances, would I have lent him double—nay, treble—the amount.

“But there was his father,” I said at last. “Why didn’t he ask him?”

“And let his father know he had forged a cheque! What father, Cyril, would help a son in a case like that? You say some fathers might? There may be a few who would, but Maynard Drew’s father was not a man like that, and Maynard knew it well. He is a hard man—hard as a nail. All this, and much more, Miss Verande has just told me. What a wonderful girl she is, Cyril—how beautiful, how attractive, how altogether captivating!”

It annoyed me a little to think that at such a moment Calvert could think of a woman’s charms.

“She may be all that,” I said without enthusiasm; “but I am not thinking of her now, or of any other woman. What I am wondering is what Enrico Marco is doing about that forged cheque, for, of course, he knows about it by now.”

“Miss Verande told me the firm made the discovery only the other day, and, as yet, nothing has been done. That telegram sent to you at Taormina by Enrico Marco was despatched on the day the forgery came to light. Marco at once communicated with Miss Verande, to

whom he knew Drew to have been secretly engaged, and both telegrams urging you to come back at once to London, the one from Marco, and the one from Miss Verande, were sent owing to the discovery of the forgery."

"But why to me?" I said. "What do they think I can do? Drew was nothing to me beyond being an acquaintance."

Calvert was silent a moment. He moved awkwardly in his chair, glancing at me curiously from moment to moment.

"Do you believe," he suddenly asked, "in saving a dead man's honour?"

I told him it depended upon the man—and upon the circumstances. Then, all at once, the proposal he was about to make dawned upon me.

"Ah, I see what you mean," I said. "Drew always claimed me as his greatest friend, so you consider it to be my duty to save his honour by settling this debt of his—eh?"

"You put things very bluntly," Calvert replied, "and in point of fact, I don't think exactly that. Miss Verande has had a long interview with Marco—she tells me she detests the man. Marco, it seems, is furious. He told Drew's father of the forgery, but Drew's father refuses to pay, saying the matter is no concern of his. Though Maynard Drew is dead, Marco is so beside himself with anger that he declares he will tell the newspapers everything that happened unless someone comes forward and refunds the money which Drew stole, the sum of six hundred pounds. Poor girl, she is dreadfully distressed, for she loved Drew to distraction, and the thought of his name being dishonoured breaks her heart. She has no money herself. If she had she would pay the debt. So I thought—so my idea is—is that—that——"

"That I should pay it instead?"

"That we should each pay half."

Had I not already guessed that Calvert was in

love with Sophie Verande this sudden outburst of generosity on his part would at once have opened my eyes.

"Really, George," I said after a pause, "that's an uncommonly handsome suggestion on your part, for you didn't even know Drew. Why on earth should you saddle yourself with a debt incurred by a man who was a stranger to you?"

"Oh, I don't know," he answered suddenly. "To tell the truth, Cyril, though I never met the poor chap, yet I assure you I feel for him deeply. Put yourself in his position, and tell me how it strikes you. If I had plenty of money I would readily pay the whole sum, in order to save his name."

"Not in order," I said meaningly, and looking at him hard, "not in order, I suppose, to please the poor girl who was to have been his wife?"

In spite of his years he reddened. For some moments he sat speechless, just like a bashful schoolboy. And so keenly did the humour of the situation strike me, that I suddenly burst out laughing.

"How do you know? How did you guess?" he inquired at last.

"I suppose," I answered, "that I can see out of my eyes. And so, George," I went on, glad of the opportunity to retaliate for the many remarks he had in the past made to me regarding my passionate love for Rosemary, "and so at last you, the bachelor, the confirmed mysogonist, have fallen victim to a woman's charms, to the bright eyes and wonderful hair of an artist's professional model—a very beautiful girl, of whom you know nothing whatever!"

"Yes," he answered, suddenly looking up and fixing his gaze upon me, "yes, I have. And what is more, Cyril, I am not in the least ashamed of it. But now," he went on quickly, as though anxious to change the subject, "about this debt of poor Drew's. Are we, or are we not, going to pay it for him? You are a rich man now, you know, comparatively speaking."

My aunt !

In the excitement of the past hour I had completely forgotten the telegram announcing her death. Why, yes, of course, I was now comfortably off !

"Oh, my dear George," I answered at once. "There is now no need for us to share the debt. Six hundred pounds ! It's a mere bagatelle. All the same, I shall not do anything until I have seen Marco. He's an enormously rich man, as you know, and I consider that he ought to wipe off the poor fellow's debt, all things considered."

"But he can't consider 'all things,'" Calvert answered. "You forget he knows nothing of Drew having been threatened in the way he was. Perhaps if he knew he would wipe off the debt. He might feel enormously grateful to Drew if he knew how he had saved the firm from a débacle—for it would have amounted to that had Drew revealed the secret. The firm would indirectly have suffered an immense loss had he decided to save his own skin."

I confess I could not picture Enrico Marco expressing "enormous gratitude" to anybody for any service rendered.

When, indeed, next day, I called upon him, he struck me as being even more offensive than on the occasion I had been to see him at the time of Drew's death. True, he now had cause for complaint—it is no small matter for a partner, even the most "insignificant" partner in a firm of stockbrokers, to forge a cheque in the firm's name—but it struck me that, the defaulter being dead, Marco might at least have spared the abuse he heaped upon his ashes. Nothing, however, seemed to him too harsh to say of the dead man. One thing in his attitude rather amused me. He seemed in the course of his abuse indirectly to imply that as I had been intimately acquainted with Drew, therefore I must, in some way, have been, if not directly implicated in the crime, at least to blame for it. I suppose it was for that reason he thought I ought to pay.

And in the end I did pay, though not until I had received in writing an assurance from Marco that, in the event of me paying my dead friend's debt, the forgery should be hushed up and the matter never spoken of, or in any way alluded to again.

"It is most generous of you, Mr. Fane," was, I remember, Marco's observation when I had handed him the cheque for six hundred pounds. "I always say that in business I would sooner deal with a gentleman than with anybody else."

That remark, coming upon the top of the abuse he had piled upon the dead man, stirred me considerably.

"If all people were of that opinion," I answered pointedly, "I am afraid, Mr. Marco, that you would soon be a poor man."

The shaft hit home, and I was glad it did. Enrico Marco turned white to the lips, and his face grew livid. The greatest insult one could offer him was, I knew, to hint at his being other than a "gentleman." Most men who are cads by nature—and plenty of well-born men are that—resent nothing more than an intimation that they are badly bred. A gentleman properly so-called, whether he be an earl's son or a linen-draper's, is amused if a man tries to insult him by telling him to his face that he is "no gentleman."

And now, bit by bit, the mystery of the great musician's life was revealing itself. Louise Joubert's statements were not, perhaps, to be trusted, for events had shown that often she spoke and acted under the influence of another. The girl Theresa, on the other hand, I had come to believe implicitly; also, knowing her story, I felt nothing but pity for her. To what straits must she not have been driven to have been forced by Madame Joubert, under the influence of Gasperini, to administer that drug to Jeans, and then to Rosemary? She said she had been mad at the time, and seeing as much of her as I had done of late, I really believed that she had not been responsible for her actions. Thus

is it, I reflected, that probably many criminals are created, and men and women punished who, left alone, would be far from wholly evil.

She had told me too, the reason she believed Gasperini had desired Jeans' death, Rosemary's, and also mine. He had been madly enamoured of Rosemary, and was so still, though owing to his illness he had not seen her since he and Joubert had embarked with her at Taormina. In order to facilitate his determination to become possessed of her, he had resolved to rid himself of me, and, to do that the more easily, and with less chance of suspicion ever resting upon himself—for he was cunning in the extreme—he had decided first to poison Jeans, whom he knew to be my faithful and devoted servant, and therefore a factor to be reckoned with after my death, if ever suspicion of foul play should arise.

The poison he had decided to use, the poison he had handed to Joubert, with the instructions that she had written on the paper I had subsequently found, was gelsemium—an extract from the root of the yellow jasmine—the effects of which have already been described. Due directly to Louise Joubert's clever plotting, Rosemary's maid, who had been with her over a year, had so suddenly given notice to leave, and at once Theresa had applied for the vacant post, which she had succeeded in obtaining.

And now still further revelations had been made by the pretty Sophie Verande. Indeed, I was tempted to think that her information would, in the end, prove to be fully as important as any. One point in particular I wanted to clear up was why Drew had seemed suddenly so discouraged that day in my office when, after he had unburdened himself to me on the subject of the bank-notes which had been paid to him by a man named Brown and afterwards stopped, I had incidentally mentioned to him that the name on the envelope left by Quain, to be called for, had been addressed to a mysterious "Mr. Brown."

I seemed well upon the way to disentangle this complicated skein of mystery. But this was a very curious and interesting point.

Ah ! Had I in the least suspected the fearful ending to it all, and how close at hand it was, how different my sensations would have been from that restful feeling which on that day temporarily possessed me !

CHAPTER XXVII.

SOME SINISTER WHISPERS.

STRANGE rumours had spread about London.

I had heard them in the clubs and also from men who never enter a West-End Club. As yet, nothing had appeared in any newspaper—probably because sub-editors of newspapers have a wholesome—or call it unwholesome, if you will—dread of running any risk of incurring an action for libel.

But they were serious—very serious—reports.

None seemed to know how the rumours originated, or whence they first emanated. Men said one to another: "Have you heard these extraordinary stories about Gasperini, the violinist?" and the answer generally was: "Yes, I wonder what's really happening!"

Apparently everyone had heard them, but at the same time nobody seemed able to say from whom he, or she, had first gathered the reports.

What were the reports, or, at any rate, the rumours? That would have been difficult to say, definitely, for nothing definite was said. A general impression was abroad, however, first that Gasperini had fallen from his pedestal; secondly, that he was in some way under a cloud; thirdly, that he had been mixed up in some sort of peculiarly abominable scandal or other; fourthly, that he was a man whom it would soon be the fashion to shun entirely, just as it had been the fashion of a

few months before to receive him with open arms, speak of him in terms of fulsome adulation, and toady him upon every available occasion.

At a little tea-party I gave one afternoon at Rumpelmayer's, at which Calvert and Rosemary and Sophie Verande were present, as well as two other men, I overheard a remark which greatly excited my curiosity. At the table next to ours I heard a woman say to her companion :

"My husband told me only yesterday that a fearful scandal will be made public very soon. He heard of it at the Foreign Office, of all places. If it does come out it will mean the end of the great Gasperini for good and all."

They lowered their voices, and I could distinguish nothing more until the first speaker happened to say in a little louder tone.

"Well, if it's true, then he ought to be hounded out of the country. Poor woman! how terrible! But can't something be done? Surely somebody has a right to interfere and save her!"

In vain I tried to catch her companion's reply. People were talking noisily around, and her voice was completely drowned. What I had just heard, however, convinced me that the rumours were not the idle gossip such rumours so often are. That Gasperini's star was setting, there could not be a doubt. But a scandal! What scandal—as we understand the word in London—could there be connected with his name; and who was the poor woman they had spoken of so feelingly?

Two days later the storm began to break. Happening to glance through a late edition of an evening newspaper, I read in it the following cryptic, carefully-guarded paragraph :

"Strange rumours have of late been current in London concerning the private life of a famous musician. If these stories are true—we sincerely hope they are not—then this musician deserves the

utmost penalty the law can enforce, and should be immediately arrested. If the rumours are not true, it behoves those in authority at once to track them to their source, and make an example of those who set them in circulation. We English are said to be a careless, easy-going nation. We are, indeed, if we countenance such acts without a word of protest."

I read it twice, and the second reading puzzled me more than the first had done. Could the paragraph have reference to any musician other than Gasperini? That was possible, of course, yet I judged it to be exceedingly improbable, in the face of the rumours I had heard. Besides, the paragraph expressly referred to "strange rumours" that had "lately been current." Oh, no, the musician alluded to must be Gasperini and no other! The woman who had been referred to, could she be other than Louise Joubert?

Next day a morning paper published fresh insinuations:

"Concerning the current stories of an artist whose name is a household word, we are assured by a trustworthy correspondent that astounding revelations will be made shortly. He hints that hourly a novel development is expected, which will closely connect the scandal with an even more serious matter—nothing less than the disappearance in London in May last of the wealthy Manchester cotton-broker, Mr. Cuthbert Quam."

"Have you seen this statement?" I exclaimed as I was shown into Theresa's room in the apartments in Bayswater which Calvert had engaged for her. He had done this for the purpose of being able to "produce" her at once should she be needed to give evidence; for from what she had told him, and from what Sophie Verande and Rosemary had also told him, he felt that Gasperini would probably soon be wanted by the police

In the face of the evidence he had collected concerning Gasperini, it seemed impossible that something must not shortly occur which would lead to him being placed under arrest.

"What is it?" she asked, taking the paper from me.

- I saw her raise her eyebrows as she slowly read the paragraph. She smiled as she handed the paper back to me, then quietly remarked:

"Ah, I knew it must come soon!"

"What must come soon?" I exclaimed, restraining my excitement. Her peculiar calmness astonished me, though I knew that outward calmness was, with her, no proof of her inward feeling.

"Suspicion of his being cognisant of that murder."

"Murder!"

"Wait, and you will see," she said. "I don't care what I tell you now, Mr. Fane. I will dare anything, risk anything—it is all one to me. The only thing I long for to-day is to see that man standing in the dock. And he will stand there very soon—oh, yes! believe me he will. I have another witness now, a man who will bear me out in everything I say, and who, in doing so, will unknowingly be helping to impress the truth. He is a waiter named Michele Murri."

"Murri!" I cried. "What, the waiter in the *Recherché* restaurant, in Soho?"

The girl nodded in the affirmative.

"Then you, too, know of him?"

"I know of him. Mr. Calvert knows him well. Weeks ago he told Mr. Calvert about—well, much concerning Gasperini's past life."

"And what he said was true. I have known Murri two years, at least. He never lies. And he believes what I have told him of Volpi's later life, his life to-day, and he will bear me out—for—for he loves me. I knew his wife, poor thing; I was her greatest friend. But she is dead, you know, and it is due to Volpi that she is dead."

"That is what Murri told Mr. Calvert," I said quickly. "He told him it was due to his wife being starved for months through Gasperini's having forced him out of work, that she afterwards died."

"I will bear witness to that, too," she said. "Hark!"

We both sat up, listening intently—the rooms were in a side street where the noise of the traffic could not be heard.

"What was it?" I asked at last.

She half-closed her eyes, wearily drawing her hand across her brow.

"I can't make it out," she went on. "Twice yesterday, and now to-day, I, too, have thought I heard a cry—the cry of a woman in distress. I heard it distinctly then; yes, quite clearly, and yet you——"

"Certainly I heard nothing"

"My imagination, I suppose," she replied with a sad smile. "Oh! why am I like this? What has come over me? What is happening? Hush!—There!—Didn't you hear it that time?"

I shook my head.

Presently she rose, and began to pace the room. Then suddenly she stopped.

"What a good man you are, Mr. Fane," she exclaimed, looking down at me. "Why are there not more men like you? You are so kind, so considerate. I liked you the first time I saw you—that day on the boat, you know, when we were on our way to Naples. You ought to hate me, seeing the sort of woman I have been, the life I've lead, those dreadful things I tried to do. Have you forgotten all, or else how is it you are—as you are?"

As she talked to me thus, so oddly, yet so naturally, I could hardly believe she was a woman who had led an evil life; less still could I realise she was a woman who had, for a short time, been Rosemary's maid. No wonder Rosemary considered her the best maid she had ever had, for she appeared not to belong to the servant class at all.

Yet, in spite of her declaration that she did not now mind what she said, I was unable to obtain further information from her concerning the great musician, or his past. She would say nothing about Quain, though from the remark she had uttered when first I had shown her the paragraph in the newspaper, I believe she must actually know why Quain had disappeared, and also what had become of him.

"Murdered," she had said. And she had said it so quietly, and with such calm conviction, that surely she must know.

My curiosity had now become stirred to its highest pitch.

"Look here, Theresa," I suddenly blurted forth, "you must tell me more concerning Quain. I will force you, if you refuse."

I had risen, and now stood looking at her. To my surprise, she only smiled.

"Nobody can force me, Mr. Fane—no, not even you ! And you could do more with me than most men, but then only by kindness. I must ask you to leave me now—will you, please ? "

I was anxious to get her to tell me more about that strange-looking implement formed out of three button-hooks ; but I felt that, under the circumstances, it would be useless to try. Therefore, taking my hat and stick, I went.

Three weeks had passed since our return to town : since that evening at Hornton Street when Rosemary had told me what had happened to her in Sicily, and Calvert had fallen so desperately in love with Sophie Verande.

The beautiful girl with the red hair had, during those weeks, come frequently to Hornton Street, and Rosemary and she had formed a strong friendship. What surprised me was that Madame Joubert had never once called, as I had fully expected her to do. Nor had she written, or shown other sign of life. Of Gasperini, too, we had seen nothing, though the rumours still continued

—strange indefinable rumours which, while stating nothing definite, conveyed a great deal.

Was it a lull before the storm, this long period of quietude? Should we suddenly hear something terrible concerning the violinist, or would the rumours die down as they sometimes do, and life continue its natural, unruffled calm?

Certainly, since our return, Rosemary seemed to have entirely outgrown her unhealthy infatuation for Gasperini. Frequently she spoke of him, but never in the tone she had adopted on those dreadful occasions when she had ended by drifting into a kind of dream. One thing surprised me, since our return to London, namely, she had not once touched her violin, which still lay unheeded in its case upon the piano, and once or twice when I had suggested her playing to me she had replied in a weary tone that she didn't feel inclined. Could this remarkable change be in any way due, I wondered, to what had occurred during those days when she had been alone with Joubert on board ship and in the train? It seemed impossible, a fantastic idea, and yet, after all that had happened, nothing I thought, was too fantastic to be without the bounds of possibility.

Daily I now attended my office in the City, and, though engrossed in business, I still thought incessantly of Gasperini and of Rosemary, of Louise Joubert and of Sophie Verande, of Theresa, and of all the strange events with which they had been connected, either directly or indirectly. It was three o'clock one afternoon, and I had just returned to my office after lunch at Birch's, when I was told that I was wanted on the telephone.

It was Calvert who spoke, but his voice sounded strained, excited. He was so rarely excited that I asked him what was the matter.

"Only this," he said quickly. "I was in Grove End Road an hour ago—I had gone to see about a house for a friend—and, remembering that Gasperini lived in that road, I thought I'd have a look at the outside of his

place—you have so often described it to me. The road was almost deserted, and when I came to the house I identified it at once, from your description of its curious windows. I stood outside the gate, looking up at the windows, wondering, dreaming of all that had happened during the past months, when, all at once, I saw in an upper window an awful apparition."

"An apparition!" I exclaimed, over the 'phone. "Why, what do you mean? What was it like?"

"My dear Cyril, it was Madame Joubert—oh, yes, I'm certain; but, my God! how changed she was—how terrible she looked! Her face had the most awful expression I have ever seen on the face of a human being. She was white as death; her eyes, bloodshot, I could see even at that distance, seemed to be starting from their sockets. She wore what looked to me like a nightdress—a pale grey nightdress—and she must have stood there motionless for quite half a minute. Suddenly I saw her start, and she turned her head and glanced hurriedly behind her. Then, raising her arm quickly she seemed to struggle with the window-fastening as if striving in a fever of terror to unfasten it and push up the sash. She opened her mouth as though to cry out, but at that instant a bare black arm was stretched out, the great dark hand closed over her mouth, and she was dashed backwards and out of sight—hurled to the floor, I truly believe. I waited there, horrified, expecting to see her again; but, though I must have stood for five minutes, I saw nothing more. I was on the point of entering the gate and going up to the house to make inquiry, but on second thoughts I decided that, before doing anything, I'd ring you up and tell you. What is to be done, my dear Cyril? Something must be done, and at once. It's too awful to think of what may be happening. I am certain the woman is being monstrously ill-treated—her face was so drawn and white, her eyes so dilated, her whole expression so terrible that I believe they are torturing her in some dreadful way. And you know the rumours

that are about. They all point to something of the kind happening to somebody over whom Gasperini has complete mental control. I think of telling the police. What would you advise ? ”

Hurriedly I focussed my thoughts. Yes, something must be done without a moment's delay. But what ? Tell the police ? No ! There would be formalities, postponements, the tying and untying of red tape.

“Where are you speaking from ? ” I asked quickly.

“Home. I've come straight from St. John's Wood.”

“Wait for me,” I answered. “I'll come out to you at once. Don't tell the police. I'll think out some line of prompt action.”

And then I replaced the receiver.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE GREEN LIGHT.

WITHIN half an hour I was alone with Calvert in his smoking-room at Hornton Street.

"Do you remember," I said to him, "the day we attended my aunt's funeral at Torquay that I told you I believed Gasperini was one of those human monsters who have a lust for cruelty?"

"Quite well," he answered, "and I also told you I had already gathered as much from what that waiter, Murri, had told me about him."

"For a month now," I continued, "none of us have seen Madame Joubert until you saw her to-day. Nor has anyone seen Gasperini, for that matter. It is during these weeks that the strange rumours about him have got out. I can't think who started them, but somebody must know something."

"If Gasperini were a poor man, living in a slum, I believe his house would long ago have been entered by the police. But a man of his wealth, a man all society has raved about—well, the police can't well raid such a man's house unless they have exceedingly strong evidence to go upon. Even if you told them what you have seen, I doubt if they would act. Most likely they would not believe you, or, believing you, would pretend not to until stronger evidence was forthcoming. And then, when the evidence had been obtained, they

would need to get a warrant, and all that takes time. There's no time to waste, if we are to save the poor woman from the clutches of that fiend. You may think my idea impracticable, my plan too risky to be adopted, but I've thought the whole thing out on my way here, weighed the pros and cons, and have decided to act upon it—alone, if you refuse to take any part."

"I will do anything in reason, after what I have just seen," Calvert replied at once. "What is your proposal?"

"Simply this. I can at once secure the services of two rough men I know, who will dare anything, and stick at nothing. I did them a good turn once, and, scoundrels though they have been, they will, I believe, do anything I ask them, though of course I shall have to pay them. I can get at them by telephone. I shall get through and tell them to come here as soon as possible."

"But what is your plan? You haven't told me even now," Calvert exclaimed impatiently.

"That we force an entrance to Gasperini's house and see for ourselves what is happening there—you and I and the two men. You can have no idea, George, how my curiosity is stirred by what you told me on the telephone. I am simply obsessed by curiosity, and I must get into that house—get into it now with the least possible delay. If you won't come, I will go alone, with the two men."

He paused, considering deeply.

"It's a fearful risk," he said at last. "We don't know what we might not let ourselves in for. The police may come down on us, you know, and there'll be the devil to pay."

"Oh," I said lightly, "I'll see to any payment there may be. I've plenty of money now, thanks to my kind aunt. And this is the sort of enterprise that appeals to me. It's more exciting than the City, I assure you. Besides, the woman's life may be, and probably is, in jeopardy. You having chanced to see her to-day may

be the cause of saving her life. Will you do it? Will you come?"

Again he paused, and began to pace the room, for he was ever cautious.

"Think it over," I said, "while I go and telephone; My men work at Covent Garden. I have a friend in Bedford Chambers who will send his clerk to find them for me. They are always there, or thereabouts."

A few minutes later my friend in Bedford Chambers said he would send his clerk at once to find the men, and for some minutes we conversed. He wanted, of course, to know what was up, why I wanted the men, and why I needed them in such haste. I refused to tell him, and he laughed. These men—"scoundrels," I had called them, though they were hardly that—were among the toughest "porters" in Covent Garden Market—which is saying a good deal—and able in a moment of emergency to use their fists—at one time they had appeared not infrequently in what are termed out of courtesy, or maybe out of irony, "friendly bouts," at the National Sporting Club. The work of packing and unloading the Covent Garden carts, they had obtained through my influence, and as I had secured this work for them at a time when actual starvation threatened them, they had been grateful ever since. There is more of human gratitude in men of that class, I sometimes think, than in plenty of well-fed men about town who live by borrowing and sponging on their friends.

"I'll ring you up when my clerk returns," my friend said at last, and I heard him hang up his receiver.

On my return to the smoking-room I found Calvert standing with his back to the grate, his hands tucked beneath his coat-tails.

"Yes, Cyril, I am with you," he said at once. "Have you your men?"

"They are coming."

We lit cigars, mixed ourselves spirits and soda, and sat down to wait.

A feeling of restrained excitement prevented our talking much. We were wondering what we were going to see when we got inside that house! On the two occasions I had been there I had seen nothing but the two rooms—the one where I had spent half-an-hour awaiting Gasperini's arrival, the room with the wall covered with peculiar stringed instruments of historic interest, and the large apartment with the mirror ceiling, the shaded, curious, oddly-arranged and tinted lights, the low divans, and Oriental draperies, the heavy luxurious perfumes, the great crystal bowls with their shining, flashing gold-fish swimming slowly, ceaselessly, ever round and round in their monotonous, fascinating, unending circles.

The thought of this brought vividly back to my mind the peculiar little fountain which I had noticed on the occasion of my second visit—the fountain in the oddly-shaped crystal vase with the narrow neck like an antique amphora, which stood upon a carved pedestal of ivory. As I remembered it I seemed to see it again, with the gold and silver carp glittering so strangely as they glided in and out the transparent rockery of iridescent quartz and lustrous fluor lit up by cunningly-concealed electric lights of many peculiar hues. I saw the fountain playing again, now sinking low until it almost vanished, now darting up in little jets and sprays which, as I looked at them, changed from white to amber, from amber to green, from green to orange, from orange to red, then, dazzling, fascinating after turning to various medleys of tints, impossible to describe, it assumed a kind of deep purple shot with yellows and reds and greens of different ever-varying shades, which remained longer than any of the colours which had gone before.

Gasparini had called that vase an amphora, I remembered. It was pear-shaped, and he seemed to take a singular interest in it, for he told me he had only recently designed it, and I had complimented him upon its beautiful though bizarre effect. Then altogether we had risen and gone over to it to examine it more closely,

and, as I had bent over it, the water had exhaled wonderful and delicious ever-changing perfumes, until suddenly a horrible odour had shot up from it, causing me to start back with an exclamation of disgust, a strong odour of almonds, of which I am not fond. Another thing I now remembered vividly was the expression that had entered Gasperini's eyes at that instant, as it had done once or twice before while I had sat talking to him, the look that had so reminded me of the merciless expression of the eyes of a puff-adder. Why had he looked like that at that moment? What was there about that fountain which interested him so exceedingly?

Again my thoughts reverted to the rooms I had not seen. What should we find in them? I had met men who had visited Gasperini, but none had ever been admitted beyond the mysterious curtains of those two extraordinary rooms. How did he live; I wondered? What servants had he there, besides those dark-eyed Nubians; what did he eat, and by whom were his meals prepared? The idea of a man of his temperamental nature and eccentricity sitting down daily to a heavy British meal seemed to me unthinkable. In those other rooms must be strange things, too—things stranger, perhaps, than any I had as yet seen.

I was determined now, at any cost—at any risk—to explore that extraordinary interior, discover everything, see all for myself.

I thought again of Louise Joubert. What had happened to her? what had caused that fearful change in her appearance that Calvert had pictured to me so graphically? What had Gasperini done to her? How was he treating her now—at this very moment, while we sat idly smoking?

The telephone-bell rang, and I sprang to my feet. Yes, the men would come—they had already started! They were coming in a taxi, and would be with us very soon.

A scared look was on the maid's face when, a little later, she entered to tell us that two men awaited us

in the hall. Rosemary, who had been shopping, returning as they arrived, had been equally alarmed at the sight of them. Now she joined us.

"You have no idea what awful-looking persons are downstairs!" she exclaimed. "I heard them inquire for Cyril. What horrid people you know, Cyril, and what ever have they come here for? The way they looked at me as I passed them terrified me. They might be burglars by the look of them, or even worse."

"They've been burglars in their time, Cyril tells me," Calvert laughed. "We are going out with them now. Wouldn't you like to come?"

He turned to the maid, who was leaving the room.

"Show the gentlemen up, Mary," he called to her, laughing.

"Up here, sir?" asked the girl, astonished.

"Yes, up here. And bring two more tumblers."

Rosemary stood aghast. Then she said:

"You two are not fit to be left alone. Phew! What an atmosphere! I believe you have been smoking here the whole afternoon?"

Then, hearing heavy footfalls on the stairs, she hurriedly made her escape.

Briefly I outlined my plan to the rough customers. They grinned as I told them there were two giant natives, deaf and dumb, whom they might be called upon to "subdue"—I thought that the best word to use; had I said "tackle" they might, I feared, do the Nubians some bodily injury, and anything of that kind I particularly wished to avoid. We were going to call at the house, I said, and, if our entry were barred, they were to thrust aside anyone opposing us, as, law or no law, we were determined to obtain entrance. And, as soon as we had entered, they were to shut the doors quickly in order to prevent possibility of outside interference. Above all, everything was to be done in as quiet and orderly a manner as possible; there was to be no violence or unnecessary hostility, and my orders were to be executed to the letter.

"'Ow many on 'em is in there, guv'nor?" inquired the more formidable-looking of the two, biting off the end of the long cigar I had given him. Though of rather short stature, he was thick-set, heavy-browed, with the arms of a Hercules. He looked as though he could tackle both Nubians single-handed, and even then I should have pitied them.

"We don't know," I replied. "Probably only two whom it may be necessary for you to attend to."

We went off in a taxi shortly before five, and, having dismissed it fifty yards from our destination, made our way on foot to Gasperini's house.

The blinds of several of the windows, both upstairs and downstairs, were, I noticed, pulled down. I drew Calvert's attention to this, and he replied that in the morning none of the blinds were down.

Grove End Road was almost deserted. Quickly we pushed open the gate and walked quietly up to the house. I pressed the electric button, and, as before, the strange green warning light appeared instantly in the windows at the sides of the door.

Then I waited in breathless expectancy.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE DEATH-SONATA.

THE green lights went out.

Restraining our excitement, we waited, expecting the door to open at any instant and those sphinx-like Nubians to appear, as they had done on the former occasions.

But nothing happened.

Again I pressed the button, and yet a third time, with the same result. On each occasion those queer, green lights had shone up. Each time they had vanished as I removed my finger.

Five minutes must have elapsed while we stood there, yet still the door remained closed.

After a brief consultation we decided to try the back entrance, but there, too, the door was shut — and locked, for we tried to open it. Nor was there a bell, or anything resembling one. There was a knocker, but we deemed it imprudent to knock, for that would have set Gasperini on his guard.

This was distinctly disappointing. Then, all at once, the idea occurred to one of my hired ruffians that, somewhere on the ground floor a window might be open. He even hinted that he wondered we had not tried a window first, from which I concluded that this was not

his maiden attempt at entering a house surreptitiously, though it certainly was mine.

His proposal proved a good one, for close to the back-door we quickly found, not an open window, but one which was unfastened. Carefully, without a sound, he raised the sash as high as it would go.

"'Oo leads?" he inquired in a hoarse whisper. He had suddenly become amazingly alert, much as a sleepy racehorse does when it comes on to the course.

I felt inclined to say I would enter last; but, as the instigator of the raid, I had to answer:

"Oh, I'll get in first."

Calvert, being middle-aged, had some difficulty in clambering in. With remarkable agility the men followed him, and, at once kneeling down, began to pull off their boots. I concluded we must do the same, and told Calvert so.

There was plenty of daylight in the stone-flagged corridor as we made our way along. Cautiously we peeped into the kitchen, the pantry, and other rooms in the back premises. They were commonplace in the extreme, and all deserted.

My men seemed so adept in the art of turning handles and opening doors without causing the slightest sound, so we left this task to them. Facing a large oaken door they had just opened, was a flight of bare wooden stairs, and up these we crept, keeping well at the sides lest our steps should make a board creak. In a minute we stood upon the first floor, listening intently, hardly breathing.

No sound whatever was audible. So dead was the silence that the house might have been uninhabited.

Signalling to Calvert and the men to stay where they were, I crept on tiptoe along the corridor, on which was a thick, soft, Oriental carpet, and at every door I came

to I stooped to listen. But in no room could I detect any sound.

Had Gasperini and his victim, or victims, his natives or anybody else he had with him, left hurriedly before our arrival?

Was this raid of mine to prove, after all, but a fool's errand?

Suddenly I caught my breath. I had heard something—a sound almost inaudible.

I strained my ears. Ah!

It sounded like a long sigh—it might have been a gasp. Whence had it come? I had not the least idea.

A door was on my right, and another on my left. Probably, then, the sound had issued from one of those two rooms.

If only I dared to turn the handle slowly, cautiously, and carefully peep in! So intense was my curiosity that I felt greatly tempted to, but my courage failed me.

Again I heard it—the same sound exactly—a kind of long-drawn sigh, which ended in a sob! That time I had heard it quite distinctly. It had seemed to be beside me, and not in either room.

I glanced up at the ceiling, then down at the floor, for I was now at the end of the corridor. Tip-toeing a step further I saw that a deserted passage ran to right and left.

Suddenly I heard the sound a fourth time. It was where I stood, apparently from beneath my feet! I looked down. The carpet ended here. It was, I saw, not tacked down. Stooping I lifted the carpet. In the board beneath was a brass ring, flush with the floor, also a brass bolt. Rolling the carpet back a foot or two, I came to rusty hinges. At once I slid back the strong bolt, slipped my fingers into the ring, and pulled.

A door in the floor opened, revealing a flight of wooden stairs, at most a yard in width. The door was

not heavy, and presently it stood open, resting against the roll of carpet.

- Should I go back to Calvert and make known my discovery? No, that would waste time, and who could say what surprise might be in store—what might not happen at any moment?

In my stockinged feet I went slowly down the steps, holding tight with both hands, for the steps were very steep. One, two, three, four—I counted eleven steps before I reached the bottom.

I was in darkness, but for the glimmer of light admitted from above. I seemed to be in a room. I felt for matches, to find to my chagrin that I had none on me. Bitterly I thought at that instant of the electric torch I had at home. Had I foreseen anything of this kind, of course I would have brought it.

A dreadful feeling of fear all at once possessed me. Fear of what? Though I could see nothing, I distinctly "felt" a presence.

Out of the darkness there came a low moan!

Reckless, all at once, I "felt" my way into the blackness of the room in the direction whence the sound had come. Cautiously I stole forward—forward still, my arms extended, my fingers spread. Something touched me, and I sprang back!

Beside myself with fright, I clutched blindly. I held a human being—a woman, for my fingers had felt her hair. Now I gripped her arms above the elbow, to find they were bare. Her face was close to mine; her hot breath fanned my cheek, and I tried to pull her forward, towards the faint light.

"Don't, don't!" she gasped, almost in my ear. "Ah! you—you are choking me!"

"Who are you?" I whispered hoarsely. "Tell me—quick! quick!"

She did not answer, but I could hear her gasping now, panting in the darkness. Oh, for a match, a light of any kind! Twice, thrice, I spoke to her again, but no

reply came. The only sound audible was her strained, heavy breathing. Terribly excited, I went back to the steps. I was about to mount them, to give Calvert the alarm, when I noticed, close to them, a small, electric switch. I depressed it, and the room was lit.

Never shall I forget the weird sight my gaze rested upon at that moment.

I shall not describe it in all its hideous detail, for it was too gruesome. Quite a large room, at eight or ten points tinted electric lights shone down upon the walls, revealing the heavy dusty old tapestries with which they were covered. The room was furnished, but in a peculiar way. Every bit of furniture was made of zinc, or what looked like zinc—tables, chairs, stools, shelves, drawers, and a long settee. Nowhere was upholstery of any kind. Nowhere was any sign of comfort, let alone of luxury. The appearance of the settee, in particular—bare metal—made me almost feel pains in my limbs as I looked at it. Much else that was in that room—the secret room of the artist in crime—I dare not describe, lest the description revolt my readers.

Facing me, stood Louise Joubert. Scantily draped, her back to the wall, she had round her neck a loop made apparently of plaited oxhide. The end extended to an iron hook screwed into the ceiling, and was there fastened tightly. Had the woman tried to sit—a chair was just beside her—or even rest her limbs, she must have hanged herself. Not far from her a green electric lamp shone its ghastly light upon her face. Her appearance was hideous.

Looking straight at me, she seemed, in a dazed way, to recognise my face, but she neither spoke, nor made sign. Now, approaching, I noticed that her flesh had a strange, unnatural tint, for upon her face, her chest, her arms, was a kind of purple rash. It showed in some places more strongly than in others. And all the

time her nerves twitched as though in some strange way she were suffering.

“Great heavens!” I exclaimed hoarsely, “who has treated you like this?”

The sound of my voice seemed to bring her to her senses. She spoke rationally, though hurriedly.

“Go! Go!” she whispered, terrified. “If he finds you here; if—if he gets to know—if——”

She stopped abruptly, listening.

I had pulled out my pocket-knife and was trying to cut the thong which reached to the ceiling. But the blade suddenly grated; the thong had a metal core!

I looked around, hoping to find some way by which I could release her. Suddenly she gripped my hand.

“You can’t save me, Mr. Fane—it is useless trying,” she exclaimed in a despairing tone. “In an hour, or less, I shall be dead. Look at my arms—my skin! He has put something in my blood; injected it to-day, and I cannot recover now! It is impossible—nothing in the world can save me. Oh! if only you would kill me before I am in agony. God! I feel it coming now—creeping slowly over me!”

Helplessly I looked about, alive to my impotence, yet hoping still to save her. Then suddenly she spoke again.

“This is his dastardly revenge!” she murmured, “his fiendish revenge because I saved Rosemary. He has tortured me mentally in ways too terrible to explain,” and she glanced significantly at the things about the room. “This is the end—oh, God! If only I could die before the agony! If only—listen! listen!” she went on hurriedly, in short, quick gasps, her foreign accent then more marked, “and I will tell you things that you must know before I die—it was I who killed Bondi, though against my will; it was I who helped Brown to meet Maynard Drew that he might rob him; it was Brown and I who decoyed Cuthbert Quain into

this house, where Gasperini killed him in this room, just as he is killing me ; it was Gasperini who committed those mysterious murders in Italy years ago — killed the people with a strange poison few know of."

"What is it called ?" I asked quickly.

"Nicotinin," she answered, and I made a mental note of the name.

She stopped, shuddering

"My God ! It is beginning—ah ! the agony is coming ! Listen ! Listen ! Mr. Fane," and her body quivered, her face became contorted ; "beware of Gasperini, for he has gone mad. It happened since his illness—that coloured fountain in the room below—avoid it—on no account go near it, no matter what he says—and—and—oh ! my dear child !—I—I—want you to care for her when I am dead—you saw her that day, you know, at the house in Castle Street. She is with . . ." and she gave me a name and address.

"Let your mind rest concerning your little girl," I answered. "I will see that she is not neglected, I will see she is made happy."

This assurance seemed to give her much relief.

She was turning ghastly now, and I completely lost my head. Hardly knowing what I did, I rushed back to the steps, ran quickly down the corridor, and reached the spot where Calvert and the two men should have been awaiting me.

They had vanished !

The sound of music reached me. Though some distance off, it seemed to fill the house—the music of a violin—weird, compelling, intoxicating, and yet, as it seemed to me, with some wholly new note. I turned, and Calvert came towards me. His eyes were wide stretched ; their expression, so unnatural to him, alarmed me.

"Come—come quickly !" he whispered in an odd voice, and he caught me by the arm.

"I cannot !" I exclaimed, trying to draw away. "I've ●

just made a terrible discovery. The woman Joubert has been tortured—is being tortured still. The brute has inoculated her with some poison, and she is dying in fearful agony!”

“Then,” he answered quickly, “you cannot save her. Look! you must look! The man is raving mad!”

He led me into the room from which he had just issued, thence into a room adjoining. In this room was a window, from which we could look down into that extraordinary apartment wherein stood the crystal vases.

No ray of daylight penetrated the apartment down into which we now gazed in amazement. A strange, subdued glow, a hue of mauve, seemed to pervade its atmosphere, through which could distinctly be seen the shaded lamps of varying tints, the carp flashing gold and silver in their crystal water with extraordinary, kaleidoscopic effects; the little fountain sinking and falling with ever-changing colours; while the fumes of burning pastilles which floated up produced a faint blue haze.

With his back to us stood the great Gasperini on a kind of raised dais, his violin beneath his chin, his body swaying, his arms sweeping back and forth as his bow swept across the strings. All about him were the crystal bowls, and now, as my eyes grew accustomed to the strange light, I noticed that the fish in nearly all the bowls were darting round and round with extraordinary rapidity. Now I saw that the pink light was caused by curious tongues of flame which appeared and disappeared among the crystal globes, reflected in the water in a hundred different forms, which added to the iridescent hues of the glittering fish themselves which flashed and shimmered as they darted hither and thither, repeatedly leaping right out of the water, created an effect that was bizarre in the extreme.

“Good heavens!” I exclaimed to Calvert, when we had stood there for nearly a minute, “what can be

causing all those fish to spring about like that? Isn't it peculiar?"

"Peculiar!" he exclaimed excitedly, just above his breath, "why—don't you know the reason? Don't you see those curious little pink flames down among the bowls?"

"Of course I do," I answered. "But what have they to do with it?"

"Look—look again, and you will see."

Almost as he spoke the sickening truth dawned upon me. Heavens! what a fiend; what a monster in human form this Gasperini was! Mad or not, he was a man I felt at that moment I could strangle. For now I saw it all. Those little tongues of flame were not among the bowls, they came up from beneath them. The water in the bowls was slowly, gradually, being heated—those wretched fish were being boiled alive, and there, watching the spectacle of their frightful agony, revelling in it, indeed, stood Gasperini, pouring forth his glorious music, as though his spirit were enchanted.

The whole scene horrified and yet fascinated me. I could not look away. During the minutes I stood there spellbound all thought of the unhappy woman Joubert was driven from my mind. Quicker still the fish darted from their iridescent rockeries of quartz and opal, of fluor and lustre, sparkling with a thousand flashes of every conceivable hue; higher, in fearful frenzy, they leapt into the air, to fall back into the steaming water, or drop on to the floor, where, for some moments, they sprang about, then lay gasping out their lives.

And as their agony became intensified, the music of the violin grew yet more and more compelling—its wails and moans seeming symbolic of their torture. Now the air was filled with sounds of a thousand tiny splashes which faded into nothingness as the music gradually soared to fill our ears once more. Never before, surely, had there been, never will there be again, so ghastly an

accompaniment. Listening to it I could almost bring myself to believe I heard screams of those tortured creatures; almost imagine I shared the agony they endured.

Then, all at once, I sprang back into consciousness. "Calvert," I gasped, "we must stop this—I can't bear it. Where are the two men?"

"With the Nubians," he answered quickly. "They came upon us suddenly, while our backs were turned. One of them had a knife raised ready to stab me, when the men sprang upon them both like a pair of savage animals—the Nubians had immense strength, and only after a fearful struggle did your men overpower them and succeed in binding them hand and foot. Both are helpless now—in the room yonder," he added, pointing to a door.

I cast a final glance down at Gasperini, and as I did so he suddenly swung round. His eyes, black, malevolent, piercing—the eyes of a maniac, the eyes of a devil—were set upon mine. His music had stopped abruptly, with a crash his celebrated fiddle fell to the floor—that wonderful instrument, believed to date back to the early sixteenth century, and to have been the first violin of the Bologna genius, Gaspar Duiffoprugcar. Now the only sound was the splashing of the fish, louder even than before; the hissing of the steaming water; the plashing of the fountain which, as I glanced away from the mad genius, I saw was again assuming that curious purple hue that was so exquisitely beautiful.

Gasperini had drawn himself to his full height. His eyes burned with hatred and restrained fury as they roamed wildly about the room. I saw his thin nostrils distend as he glared up at us again. Then all at once the room was filled with maniacal laughter that seemed to chill my blood. Thus some instants passed. Suddenly he looked down at the instrument he had dropped. The sight of it—broken—ruined——

"Get your men, quick, Fane!" Calvert cried to me
"Something frightful will happen if he's not got under
control!"

"No! No!" I exclaimed, "the woman—Joubert—
I must rush to her at once—I had forgotten!"

"You cannot! Look at Gasperini now! Look what
he is doing! Your men—quick—*quick!*"

CHAPTER XXX.

DISCLOSES STRANGE TRUTHS.

GASPERINI, the great artist whose name was a household word throughout Europe, stood at bay, his back to the wall as we entered, that curious little fountain with its ever-changing hues playing a few feet from him. In the air was a strong but not unpleasant odour of almonds. He stood there glaring, distraught, his glance shifting swiftly from one to another of us as we advanced, slowly, cautiously, from different points, watching his slightest movement, ready for anything he might at any instant do.

Around us the incessant sound of the hundreds of tiny splashes continued, though already in several of the bowls the fish were now still—in some they floated on their sides, or belly-upward, upon the surface of the steaming water.

The kaleidoscopic colours of the little fountain, reflected on to his face from the mirror which formed the ceiling, seemed completely to alter his expression, adding weirdness to the amazing spectacle. Closer we crept—and still closer. We were twelve feet from him now—eight—less than six. The fierce, malignant look in those wild, fathomless eyes of his during those moments is still indelibly impressed upon my memory.

Then he sprang!

It was the leap of an animal—of a rabid beast. His thin fingers, upon my throat in an instant, were clamps of steel. My breath was stopped; I was blinded by the rush of blood into my brain. I reeled and gasped. Then his grasp relaxed.

Gradually I breathed again. My men were wrestling with him, had torn his fingers off me and held him. Never could I have believed he possessed such colossal strength had I not myself beheld the fearful struggle of those rough men in their endeavour to overpower him!

This way and that they swayed, now within a foot of the little fountain playing so placidly and casting upon them its changing, variegated hues; now wrestling madly up against the wall; now doubled in half, as though in a football game. Again and again the mad genius seemed to pull them forward—drag them, as it seemed to me, intentionally towards the fountain. Then, all at once, I saw the men freed from his powerful clutch. Simultaneously they gripped him, lifting him off his feet as they did so.

I caught the glance of frantic terror in his eyes as, wildly striving to raise his head, he fell, face downwards, right over the fountain in the great glass amphora. For a brief instant the water had sunk. Now it once more rose, turning, as it did so, from amber to that deep, mysterious, mauve-purple I had seen before. It leapt into Gasperini's downturned face——

His struggles ceased instantly, as though by magic. His inert head dropped forward; his hold suddenly relaxed. The men who an instant before had fought with him so desperately, turned, frightened. What had happened? What had come over him so suddenly?

"Look!" Calvert gasped. He had hurried forward and was gazing down into Gasperini's pallid face, as the men slowly, and very carefully, lowered him to the floor. Suddenly he gripped my arm.

"Cyril," he exclaimed in a hoarse whisper, "I believe the man is dead!"

Motionless he lay upon his back, and his jaws, wide-set, were stiff. His glassy eyes stared up at the mirror-ceiling into our eyes which stared down from above.

Even as we gazed, speechless with amazement, at his outstretched form, the pallor of his face increased. It grew ashen—the lips were turning grey. Then, simultaneously, we knew the truth.

Dario Gasperini, the great musician, the genius, the artist in crime, was dead!

But why had he died? What could have killed him instantly and so mysteriously? Back into my thoughts flashed Madame Joubert's words of warning: "that coloured fountain — avoid it — on no account go near it!"

Madame! Heavens! I had forgotten all about her. During all these minutes I had given her no thought. Was she in that agony she so dreaded? Was she, too, already dead? Telling the men to remain by Gasperini, I hurried with Calvert out of that awful room, ran quickly up the stairs, then back along the corridor.

The door I had pulled up stood open, just as I had left it; the light from the room below shone into my face, but no sound was audible. Descending the steps as quickly as I could I turned.

She stood there facing us, apparently unconscious, swaying slightly the ox-hide throng still around her neck, the dark rash darker still; her face drawn with pain.

In an instant Calvert was at her side. Swiftly he noted symptoms with which he was familiar.

"By heavens! we mustn't lose an instant!" he exclaimed quickly. "She certainly has been poisoned, and from her appearance I believe the poison used is that fearful and most terrible poison of the gheko lizard. I've seen one case of this kind before!"

He glanced up at the ceiling, at the hook where the

thong was tied, then a moment later he had brought over the steps.

"Hold her—she may collapse!" he said quickly. He was standing on the steps fumbling with the knotted thong which he soon untied.

"If it really is the gheko poison," he exclaimed, "then there's just a bare chance that we may save her. Its action, though extremely painful, is less rapid than that of some venoms. Go for a doctor, Cyril, at once—bring him here as quickly as you can, and on the way explain the circumstances to him. I'll wait here meanwhile, but you mustn't waste an instant."

* * * * *

How that grim and awful day ended I scarce remember. I know that Calvert himself spent the whole night beside Madame Joubert's bed, and that her ultimate recovery was due, in no small measure, to his eager vigilance. His conjecture that the woman had been poisoned with a species of lizard found in Peru proved correct, and later when a complete examination of the house was made by the police, two curious little lizards were found in cages on the roof, also several other poisonous reptiles, confined in the same way. The reason these animals were kept in captivity by Gasperini was never actually proved by the police, for some thought them to be strange pets; but, after all that had happened, and from what, soon after her recovery, Madame Joubert told us, Calvert and I came to know the truth, although we never revealed it.

What had caused Gasperini's sudden collapse and death at first puzzled even the experts. Eventually, however, the fact became known because of the odour of almonds which everybody smelt at the time. That little fountain in the amphora with its changing tints which so captivated the eye, and with its varied perfumes which delighted the sense of smell, was so con-

structed that at will it became charged with hydrocyanic gas—the most deadly of all vapours. It became so charged each time its colour turned to that strange purple; and now I knew where came the curious, pungent smell of almonds that I had noticed in Gasperini's room on the occasion of my second visit to his house, when together we had examined the little fountain in which he appeared to take such deep interest, and that he had told me had been set up but a few days previously.

While the struggle between Gasperini and my men had been in progress, and I had been standing close to the men, I had, I remembered afterwards, again smelt that deadly perfume—each time the fountain turned to purple a jet of the gas had been given off by it. Gasperini's obvious attempts to drag his assailants to the lethal fountain had, of course, been with the purpose of forcing them over the water, when even a slight whiff of the released hydrocyanic gas held in the narrow mouth of the glass amphora, must have rendered them unconscious, while a single deep inhalation would have killed them, just as he himself had been killed by it, instantaneously.

We had, indeed, been dealing with a madman!

One or two points, in connection with the stirring events of the past months still puzzled me. Why, that first night when I had called to see Gasperini, had I become unconscious, and, as I lost consciousness, had a mist seemed to rise up in the room? Why was that painting of a goldfish in the envelope left by Quain at his flat at Knightsbridge, addressed to "Mr. Brown," who was expected to call for it? What connection was there between that Brown, and the Brown who had foisted on to poor Drew the counterfeit bank-notes; and why had Drew become so upset when, that day he had called at my office, I had told him of the envelope addressed to "Mr. Brown"?

Why was that mark of the three button-hooks branded upon Gasperini's victims in Italy, and why had the

doctors not discovered that those victims had been poisoned?

Finally, why had Quain, just before his disappearance, bought three button-hooks, and why had Drew bequeathed to me three brass button-hooks and inserted in his will that very singular sentence:

"I also leave and bequeath to my friend, Cyril Fane, my three brass button-hooks, which I beg him on this, the eve of my death, on no account to lose."

Fate decreed that I was to obtain the solution to these problems from three persons, all of them women: from Sophie Verande, whose engagement of marriage to my absurdly-infatuated friend George Calvert, must, I knew, be announced before long; from Louise Joubert herself, who, now that Gasperini was dead, spoke unreservedly enough of all that had happened; and from the girl Theresa, whose gratitude for some slight service that Calvert and I had rendered her was, in view of her past life, so unbounded as to be almost pathetic.

Madame explained to me—and I had no reason for disbelieving her—that when I had become unconscious that night at Gasperini's—the night, it will be remembered, when I had found Rosemary's portrait on his escritoire and a mist had seemed to arise and envelop me—I had, in reality, been under the violinist's hypnotic influence, in which condition I had more or less remained after leaving his house, and until I had reached my chambers. As for the picture painted on silk, of a gold-fish, my surmise concerning it had, it seemed, been correct in every detail.

Quain, soon after becoming acquainted with Gasperini, had taken a singular fancy to him, and the feeling of friendship had apparently been reciprocated. Gasperini had expressed a strong desire to obtain for his collection a certain kind of extremely rare golden carp, and Quain had told him that if he would give him a picture showing the exact hues of this rare creature he would endeavour to procure a perfect specimen so marked.

That painting Gasperini had himself executed, and Quain had searched London in vain to find a fish of the kind described which possessed exactly the colouring shown.

The button-hooks he had bought at Gasperini's request, and brought to him, Gasperini having asked him to do this because, so he had said, hooks of that pattern and exactly that size could be obtained only at Harrods, and Quain lived close to Harrods.

Then something had happened. Quain and Gasperini had quarrelled—a quarrel concerning a woman—and the violinist had begun gradually, insidiously, to cast his strange, mesmeric, irresistible spell over his enemy. During the time which elapsed between the Monday afternoon, when Quain disappeared and the Wednesday evening when the woman Joubert met him at St. James' Park station and went with him in a taxi to Brown's shop in Club Row, he had been with Gasperini at his house in St. John's Wood, though already the feeling of mutual dissatisfaction had set in. It was on that Wednesday evening that Gasperini had commenced secretly to poison Quain, whose death had taken place a fortnight later, and been most agonising.

These and other statements made by Madame were corroborated in almost every detail by Theresa, who, horrified at what was happening, had, we learnt, been more than once on the point of divulging the whole of the hideous plot, but dreading the evil which must, as she knew, befall her if she did so, in the end her courage failed her.

As for Drew's display of fear when I told him that the envelope left by Quain to be called for had been addressed to a "Mr. Brown," the reason of this Sophie Verande explained in a few words. She told me that Drew had succeeded in discovering that the man who had swindled him, and whose name also was Brown, was personally acquainted with Quain. Drew was at that time in possession of a substantial sum of money

which Quain had entrusted to him to invest in an important company in course of flotation, and instantly his fevered imagination had made him jump to the conclusion that in the envelope left by Quain was a note of inquiry about himself, Brown having incidentally led him to believe that Quain often consulted him concerning the trustworthiness of people with whom he contemplated doing business.

"You see," Miss Verande went on, as she stood before us near the fireplace, "Brown, the man who palmed the false notes on to Mr. Drew, had, it seemed, told Drew that he knew Gasperini to speak to, and that some of the rarest golden carp that Gasperini possessed he had obtained for him. Small wonder, therefore, that Mr. Drew, putting two and two together, should have supposed that the man named Brown who paid him the notes was the same Brown who owned the shop where Gasperini procured his fish."

"There is still one point that puzzles me," I said to her a little later, "and that is, why did Drew bequeath to me, among the various souvenirs he left me, those three button-hooks, and make, in his will, that singular remark concerning them?"

"That is easily explained," she answered without hesitation. "Those were the actual button-hooks which Quain bought at Harrods. They are, you may have noticed, made of brass; also they are of curious form—the hooks are square-shaped instead of circular. Madame Joubert had, in part, confided to Mr. Drew the story of Gasperini's homicidal mania, had even gone so far as to tell him something about the way Gasperini in his criminal madness had branded his victims with the mark of the three hooks—she had shown him those hooks, she had taken them from Gasperini, and Mr. Drew had refused to return them. Mr. Drew must have put that in his will in order to set you on your guard. Madame Joubert and Theresa are no more criminals at heart than you or I—Madame Joubert acted wholly under Gasperini's

influence, while Theresa was terrorised by her into doing what she did."

"The girl paused, then presently looking me straight in the face, continued:

"The madman branded his victims, so I learnt from Madame, by dipping the brass button-hooks into a certain acid, then pressing it upon the flesh, where it left an indelible mark—the mark of the criminal who gloated over his crime. Why none could discover what had caused death was that the victims were killed by an injection of nicotine, the tiny puncture of the hypodermic syringe being afterwards rubbed with menthol to destroy the odour of nicotine the body must otherwise have exhaled—death from that poison being practically impossible to establish by analysis. Bondi was killed by that means, but by Gasperini, and not by Madame Joubert. Gasperini succeeded in compelling Louise Joubert—by his extraordinary mesmeric will-power, or whatever it was he possessed—to commit many crimes, but never that of murder. It is terrible to think of the awful demoniacal power that man possessed; he alone was responsible for all that has happened during these months of terror! Thank God—oh! thank God, that he is dead at last!"

* * * * *

A calm, bright evening two months later.

Again I sat with Rosemary on the terrace of the chalet, gazing out across the blue Channel at the white-winged gulls as, with shrill screams, they circled below us; admiring the glorious view which unfolded itself to right and left—the red, rugged, precipitous cliffs; the patchwork of green and red that stretched away inland as far as sight could reach; the gorgeous woodland tints of russet and orange, amber and copper, green and brown, purple and sepia—surely one of the loveliest landscapes to be found even in beautiful Devonshire.

We had arrived home a week before, at the end of our brief honeymoon in Italy. How peaceful it all seemed!

Though now late autumn, the air was still mild, and as we sat together in silence that evening many thoughts recurred to me. I recollected Rosemary's arrival here, but a few months before, as a barely-convalescent invalid; of my aunt's unremitting care of her, and her anxiety for her comfort and recovery; of that visit of Louise Joubert's; of the telegram I had received from Marco summoning me to London; of the spectacle of Gasperini standing tall and gaunt in the dusk, that evening I had passed him by in the lane from Anstey's Cove—an apparition of evil that had so unmanned me.

I gazed now at Rosemary's face, calm and beautiful, after the few minutes' silence—the silence of complete understanding—of perfect comradeship. Her profile was towards me as she looked away to the right over the red cliffs of Berry Head. The autumn dusk was falling slowly. The air was warm and odorous with the pent-up heat of the long summer and the golden fruition of a fruit-laden autumn. One bright particular star—the evening star—hung out its lamp over our heads in the haze of darkening blue. In its light my young wife was very lovely.

My eyes rested on the wealth of her burnished hair—the coils shone like dark copper in the autumn sunset glow—then fell to the broad brows beneath, the forehead white and smooth and innocent as a child's. A little lower—her eyes! Surely no woman's eyes had ever looked so sweet—young Love had bathed himself in their violet-blue depths so that, to my imagination, they were now possessed of a charm, a sweetness and a power unknown to them before marriage. I caught an enchanting glimpse of a small, shell-like ear, and the corner of her curved red mouth, so wayward and so sensitive. What a sweet face! Yet I think, even at that moment, what I most admired in Rosemary's face was its expression of deep thought, of artistic and

intellectual power. Ah, what a wife I had, was my thought. What a life-companion! One hand—the left—hung passive at her side, the slim, pink-tipped fingers curved a little, like white and pink petals of some delicate flower, and now the blue-white glimmer of the diamonds in the engagement ring on the slender third finger caught my gaze as they flashed palely in the gathering dusk, and next to it, the plain gold band . . .

An intense joy of possession took hold of me. Perhaps you, my reader, have experienced it—once in your life! It quivered through me like some exquisite, maddening strain of music, making the heart-strings vibrate to its melody. She was my own—mine with all her wonderful sweetness, her power, her charm—"till death us do part." And how nearly I had lost my Love—my wife!

As though she felt my thoughts, Rosemary suddenly stirred and turned in her low deck-chair, and as she did so I brought my chair closer to hers, catching at her white hand, bringing it quickly up to my lips as my eyes met hers, to kiss the wedding-ring with long-drawn kisses.

"Dearest! Dearest!" I whispered to her. "Did any man ever have such a wonderful wife, I wonder! Did ever two people love each other since the world began with such a love as ours? Were ever two lovers so blest as you and I?"

"And only to think," murmured Rosemary, "that but for that dear old aunt of yours, and her thought and care for me—for us both—we might never have been able to marry at all, might never have become engaged even! Look at this beautiful place she has left to us; indeed, all the happiness we are enjoying seems to have come from her hand! And perhaps she can see us now—I like to think that from somewhere, somewhere beyond that bright star above, her kind eyes look down on us, and she finds her happiness at last in watching ours. Ah! she went through a fire of trouble

in her youth, and, more painful still, that long life of resolute forgetfulness and loneliness afterwards. But now it is ended. Dear heart, I hope she is very happy ! She has given us so much—so much—*each other*.” And my wife’s voice broke in a tender, sobbing sigh, the sigh of perfect happiness.

The darkness deepened. Time passed unheeded. The sky was now a deep sapphire, in which myriad stars of the autumn night stood like diamond-points in a velvet canopy. I rose, and, leaning over Rosemary’s chair, raised her to her feet, and we walked slowly, my arm around her, to the edge of the garden, where the soft grass sloped away to the cliff, and from where, beneath magnificent oaks, we looked over the open sea, the whole calm scene one perfect harmony.

My arms closed jealously around my sweet wife, and her soft head pillowed itself upon my breast.

“My own precious darling !” I murmured, “so you are not sorry you have married me ? You don’t regret—anything—eh ? All the horrors—all that you went through ?”

“Before you came into my life”—her voice was only a breath—“the world was grey. Everything was grey—I know now—trees, lawns, flowers, the sea, everything. Life was only just one grey dream. Sometimes it frightened me. I thought, ‘Will it go on until I am old ?’ Then you came. Ah ! It all seems so strange.”

“Yes,” I said ; “but what is strange—tell me, darling ?”

“Well, you came, dear. And after I got to know you, the whole world looked as though it had been painted again with a magician’s brush—such lovely colours ! Roses—bright, blood-red roses—hung in clusters over my head ; below my feet the earth was carpeted with flowers—such flowers ! White, pink, yellow, blue ! Oh ! the world has looked so different. And it has been like that to me ever since.”

She raised her beautiful head. Her deep eyes were shining with happy tears. Her arms crept round my neck. I bent down and passionately kissed her lips—her soft hair.

"Thank heaven for your beautiful love, my own darling!" I said huskily. And we stood there together very still, her head down on my breast, my lips upon her hair.

THE END

